

Grandstand Festival

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Grandstand Festival

by [Veskasa](#)

Summary

A typical storm and an atypical story lead the Cross Guild's shadow leaders to spend more time with their chosen figurehead. Mihawk is strangely comfortable with it, but Crocodile is still learning to accept that Buggy the Clown isn't as uninteresting and weak as he'd always assumed. The ex-warlords might not get all the answers they want from Buggy, but they learn there's reason to respect the man--and maybe even begrudgingly admit that he has his charms.

Notes

It's been ten years since I've publicly contributed to fandom, so hopefully, I can finish this addition before heading back to my sandbox. I'll appreciate kind words if you've got them; otherwise, I hope you enjoy this work. Tags and the like are subject to change as I flesh out the rest of the chapters I've drafted. Feel free to message me on Twitter if I'm missing content tags or trigger warnings that need to be added. I've been out of the game so I'm no longer well-versed in the ins and outs of tagging.

[Veskasa's Twitter](#)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Karai Bari Island was not a stranger to rough tropical weather, but heavy rains and strong winds had still pushed every last Cross Guild member inside. Music and festivities filled the main tent, but the atmosphere was nowhere near its usual fever pitch. Buggy the Star Clown was noticeably absent, and his loyal followers were getting antsy. The newer recruits were especially restless. Buggy's commanders had left the private seating beyond the balcony and joined the general populace, but combined, they did not fill the emptiness left by the missing Emperor.

"I...I can't take this!" A heavy mug was slammed down on a table, frothy beer sloshing over the rim. "The Captain shouldn't be missing out on this. We've got to go get him!"

"Yeah! I bet he's working himself ragged, even during this storm."

"He really is the greatest!"

The chorus of agreements echoed around the tent, stirring more men and women to action—until a shot rang out and startled everyone to silence. All eyes turned, landing on Alvida with her smoking gun still raised. "Keep it down, you barbarians. And don't bother the boss. I doubt he's in any mood for visitors right now."

"HUUUUUH?! BUT ALVIDA—"The voices of the masses were one in their protests, but those quickly turned to shrieks of terror when Dracule Mihawk stood from his chair. A primal fear rippled through the room as sharp yellow eyes seemed to pierce the soul of every pirate present. Mihawk picked up his ornate black sword from beside his chair, and another wave of panic and whimpering spread. "Please, sir, we're sorry! We'll—"

Mihawk did not hear the pleas. He mounted his sword to his back, turned, and walked out of the main tent towards the private quarters. Most watched him go before a sigh of relief was released when he vanished. Alvida scoffed, rolling her eyes at Mihawk's dramatic display. She then turned to regard Cabaji and Mohji. "Why don't you tell these idiots why we don't bother the chairman in a storm like this." It was not a request.

Veteran mercenaries had heard the reasons before, and they sunk back into their seats with a renewed understanding. The rookies, however, crowded the commanders' table. Mihawk had left, and Crocodile was nowhere in sight. They were emboldened to approach the remaining, less homicidal leaders. "So what's going on? Captain Buggy doesn't usually miss a chance to party, even during a storm." There were synchronized nods of agreement from the gathered group.

Acrobats and tightrope walkers restarted their performances while jugglers, fire breathers, and veterans returned to their tables and meals. Slowly, jovial noise was returning. Yet the atmosphere remained tense around the commanders' table, blocking out the commotion.

Galdino straightened his glasses, "Yes, normally, our boisterous captain fills this space with his rousing speeches and domineering personality." It was the start of a speech, and Mohji and Cabaji traded looks before they interrupted. They didn't need Alvida losing her temper and beating them for ignoring her command. "It's like Alvida said." Mohji started. "Even a great guy like Captain Buggy can be affected by storms like this. Something terrifying happened years ago. He carried us, his crew, through it, and he still bears scars and memories that sour his mood."

Buggy's high command, who knew the clown's true self, always did their best to uphold the image painted for these mercenaries. They had to choose their words carefully, especially regarding stories of the past they shared.

"Terrifying? You mean he's scared?"

"No! Not scared." Galdino cut in, already on damage control.

"Well, it was scary to us," Mohji admitted. "But it instilled something far more dangerous in Captain Buggy that we don't want to provoke."

The crowd whispered, wondering what the commanders meant. Alvida sighed, getting frustrated by the non-committal explanation and unnecessary fluff. "Don't try to dance around it, you fools." Her eyes hardened. "Rage. Your great leader stays in his private quarters to spare all of you from it. You think he's intimidating when commanding you from up there," she jabbed a thumb toward Buggy's balcony, "then, believe me, you should be grateful he's not here right now."

There were several audible gulps from the gathered rookies. Although passionately devoted to Buggy, they were not blind to the clown's powerful emotions—especially his temper. Considering the control he wielded over two beasts like Hawkeye Mihawk and Sir Crocodile, they could only imagine what unbridled fury Buggy carried. Though the idea was intimidating, the gathered pirates' hearts warmed. Their outstanding chairman, as strong and strict as he was caring and considerate towards them all.

"But what caused it?" A lone voice questioned. "What could've happened that remembering it can make him so dangerous?"

Lips set in a hard line, Cabaji steeped his fingers. Lightning lit up the tent, followed by a rolling roar of thunder.

Hurricanes. For a boat sailing the Grand Line, the ruthless winds and monstrous waves could be a death sentence to even the most skilled sailors.

That day, the Big Top had sailed deep into a strong storm, and not by accident. No, her captain had directed the ship into the rough waters, a plot to try and shake their pursuers. Although they'd created some distance, the Marine's cruiser ships were more maneuverable than anticipated. Their captains were more motivated to chase a legendary pirate than to keep their crews alive.

"I should've expected it. Not even Marines can resist me. The flashiest pirate in the Grand Line, soon to be the next Pirate King!"

C a p t a i n B u g g y.

The clown was aloft, standing on the railing of the crow's nest with binoculars in hand. His watchman was gripping the mainmast, shivering and squinting his eyes as he tried to see past the rain and wind while the captain was borrowing his usual tool.

Buggy grits his teeth, lowering the binoculars as he glared at the distant ships. He seemed unaffected by the harsh wind and strong tilting of the boat. Devil fruit powers had their perks, even if they incurred the sea's wrath. Buggy tossed the binoculars back to the watchman. "If those idiots

have a death wish, fine by me!" The clown spread his arms, his coat picked up by the gale, and pulled back as he yelled, "I hope you enjoy your watery grave, Marines! No captain and crew can sail these stormy seas like the Buggy Pirates!"

"Captain!"

The wind changed, the coat attached to Buggy's shoulders whipping back into him with enough force to knock him from his perch. The moment his feet lost solid purchase, he dropped like a stone. His panicked scream was, thankfully, swallowed up by the storm as he plummeted to the deck. His body split to pieces, and Buggy twisted to grab his feet and throw them straight down. By luck alone, they landed with soles flat and the rest of his parts reassembled on top of them. The force of the impact still jolted him to the top of his head, making even his hair stand straight up. He'd stuck the landing, and that's what counted.

"Captain, sir!"

"Shut up!" Buggy swept an arm out like he was cutting through the rain. "ALL HANDS, STOW THE SAILS BEFORE THEY'RE TORN TO PIECES!"

They'd rode the strong winds into the storm; it took experience and instinct to maintain the delicate balance of current and wind to guide the large ship, but with the sudden shift in the wind's direction, they needed to change tactics. Immediately.

Buggy was confident in his crew's abilities. The Big Top was not a circus ship in name only, with all its freaks well-trained and sure of their footing. They rushed on narrow beams and ropes to follow their captain's command. Buggy chopped his arms from his shoulders, sending them back up the mainmast to help.

With his attention focused high above, Buggy overlooked the frantic and frustrated force charging him until a hand was on his hat and hair. "Buggy!" Alvida's grip was deceptively powerful, and Buggy's head popped off his neck as she whipped it around and rushed towards the bow.

"AAAAH! Alvida, what are you doing??!" His headless form chased after the woman. "Stop! Don't run with my head!!"

"Shut up, you fool," Alvida growled at her captive, finally reaching the front of the ship and holding his head up high. "Look!"

The woman forced Buggy's eyes to focus straight ahead. What he saw made his jaw slacken and his body slump behind Alvida. A few other crewmates soon joined them, wanting to see what was so urgent for themselves. "Captain Buggy, what is that?"

A vast expanse of the water ahead was roiling and twisting, two massive currents colliding. The clouds above seemed to mirror its movements, lightning striking the surface and illuminating horrified faces. The water's surface dropped, and onlookers lost their breath. Buggy broke out in a cold sweat. "Oh crap..."

"MAELSTROOOOM!!!"

That one word echoed over the entire ship, and all heads turned towards the bow. Another chorus of screams rang out from the rest of the crew as realization hit them.

"Dammit," Buggy's arms returned to his shoulders, and he grabbed his head, "Alvida, let go!!" The woman's grip wasn't tight, but she kept hold of the captain's hat, and long fingers snagged the ties in his hair. Buggy didn't have time to care, reattaching his head and jumping back from the bow. Long blue hair instantly stuck to his face and neck, and he pushed it back as his other hand shot out to find Mohji. "Listen to me!" Buggy had dragged his first mate to him as his hand slammed back into place on his wrist. He was running to the stern now, delivering frantic orders. "As many people as you need, get them below deck and load every canon with a Buggy Ball. Port and starboard sides. GO!"

Buggy threw Mohji aside as he took two steps at a time up the stairs to the helm. The single crewman at the wheel was having a hard time holding it, trying desperately to fight the current of the vortex to keep the ship out of it. Buggy kicked the man away, then slammed a foot against the bottom of the wheel to hold it in place. "I'm taking over the helm. Get below deck and help Mohji." The captain threw his orange coat to the abused helmsman, a cord ripped from the shoulder clenched between his teeth. He quickly gathered his mess of blue hair, tying it back as a crazy grin split across his face. There was a manic look in wide, sea-blue eyes.

"Cabaji! Keep a team ready to release the sails on my mark!"

"What?!" The second mate was still aloft, his disbelief echoed by the rest of the pirates who had just finished stowing the sails. "Don't question your captain!" A red and white striped bandana was tied tightly over Buggy's hair, helping to absorb some of the water and sweat that would otherwise run into his eyes. A deck below the clown, Mohji called for battle stations, herding every pirate not tending to the sails to the gun deck. Even Alvida seemed to have snapped to her senses. One look at Buggy's face told her she would not get any answers about what the crazy clown was thinking, so she retreated below deck with the crowd.

Gloved hands slammed down onto the wheel, gripping spokes as he threw his head back and laughed. Where the helmsman had struggled to control their course, Buggy held it with ease. "IT'S TIME TO GIVE THESE MARINES THE FLASHIEST SENDOFF TO DAVY JONES LOCKER!" The captain spun the wheel, turning the Big Top into the maelstrom. The ship entered the whirlpool quickly, the faster current causing it to lurch forward. Buggy had to lean hard against the wheel, grunting with the effort it took to keep his ship from getting dragged straight to the center of the vortex.

"I know you're watching this...Captain." Buggy ground out between clenched teeth. There was still a wild look on his face, his eyes crazed and his grin showing all his teeth. The entire ship groaned beneath him but was holding firm. "You told us... to never try a stunt like this." Buggy was staining now, feeling the wind change as the ship turned. If it weren't for the extra strength afforded him by the Bara Bara no mi, Buggy might not have been able to hold the Big Top's course alone. Yet he persevered, growing more excited by the second. "But this is going to be flashy as hell, so you know I can't resist!"

Buggy's hair whipped with the wind, pushed forward and surrounding his face. It was finally time, and he shouted over the roar of the hurricane to his crew on the yards.

"RELEASE THE SAILS!!"

He was pulling the wheel, trying to guide the ship back out of the faster current of the whirlpool. It didn't want to release the Big Top, but the tailwind nearly lifted the boat out of the water as the sails were unfurled and secured. He held the course straight, watching, shaking from effort and anticipation.

The bow erupted over the edge of the vortex, and Buggy held his breath. The two pursuing ships had nearly caught up but altered their formation. The Marine ships had separated to avoid the dangerous whirlpool as any sane sailor would. Buggy was sure they weren't expecting a fight—he was counting on it.

"Captain, all cannons are ready!" Mohji yelled up to the helm.

Buggy waited for a beat. The Big Top soared out of the whirlpool, throwing a large wake as she escaped. She landed in the space the Marines had so kindly made between them. Another beat as the ship evened out. A crack of lightning was followed closely by Buggy's command.

"FIRE!"

It was chaos, and not even the hurricane could swallow it all. No storm could stifle the specially designed Buggy Balls so easily. Colorful smoke, fire, explosions, and screams rang out from both sides of the Big Top as the surprise attack struck the Marine ships broadside. If the ships didn't outright sink from the damage, there was no doubt that they'd succumb to the storm.

Either way, they wouldn't be following the Big Top any longer.

Buggy locked the helm, making sure the wheel wouldn't turn from their course before he ran back and launched himself up onto the taffrail. His body split as he jumped, coming together again when his feet found purchase on the solid wood. His eyes were alight, and Buggy's unrestrained laughter echoed out at the sight of the carnage. They were close enough that he could feel the heat from the fires of the blasts that had nearly capsized the two ships. "Gyahahaha-HAH! That's what you get!" The clown shouted. "If any of you survive, don't forget who did this to you. The bravest, smartest, most flashy pirate of them all, Ca-"

"CAPTAIN!!!"

Buggy nearly bit his tongue, his lips twisting into an angry sneer. He turned around, stomping as he looked towards Cabaji, who was now at the helm and looking pale. "WHAT? ?!?" And then he noticed his second mate was pointing ahead. They'd already beaten a maelstrom sinking the sea in their path, and Buggy was so high from the success of their attack that he seemed confident there was nothing that could get in their way.

Nothing, except the massive Marine battleship bearing down on them. The world seemed to lose all sound, the rain and wind melting away as the three great barrels of the gunship moved. Slowly, they were being lowered and readied. Buggy took a breath, his mind going blank; he'd just pulled off something unthinkable brilliant, but of course, the world had to stomp on that victory before he could enjoy it.

It wasn't the enormous boom of the enemies' cannons that startled the Buggy pirates to act again, breathe, prepare to fight, and probably die. Instead, it was a quieter noise, a crack and sudden splintering in the mizzenmast as Buggy's body lurched forward. Cabaji had a clear view of the spray of blood that erupted from the clown's chest and lips. There were shouts from the few pirates who had emerged from the gun deck, and even before Buggy's body landed, they were scrambling up wet steps to get to his side.

Blood--Buggy's blood-- mixed with the rain and vibrant blue hair around the fallen captain. The first and second mate slid into place at either side of their leader, but neither knew what to do

besides shout his name. The wood underneath them was quickly stained red by a rapidly expanding pool. The screams of the crew were incoherent, tears of frustration and terror hidden by the downpour. One of Buggy's hands twitched, and he took a ragged breath, gathering his arms beneath himself to try and get up. Mohji and Cabaji each took an arm, intending to help the wounded clown to his feet.

Both men could feel it before they saw it: pure, unfiltered rage. Buggy's body felt hot to the touch, and something about the captain's aura made their breath catch in their throat.

There was an audible snap, like their very mast had split in two, and the entire crew's vision went white.

The rookies were unmoving, unblinking, waiting for the commanders to continue. Tense, anxious seconds, minutes—Buggy was alive now, but they needed to know—

"And?" Someone finally prompted. "What happened next?"

Mohji sighed, settling a hand in Richie's thick mane to stroke the lion's long, soft fur. "Well...we aren't sure." He admits. "It's like I said, everything went white. We passed out."

"The entire crew," Alvida confirmed, begrudgingly including herself in that picture.

"We don't know how much time passed, but everything...it was over when we woke up." Mohji met the eyes of their crowd. "The storm was gone, and the sun was shining. The Marine ships were nowhere in sight, and we were safe."

"And Captain Buggy...?"

"Injured." Cabaji offered. "The Marines shot him with a sea prism bullet. Thankfully, it didn't splinter in him and went through. He'd moved around while we were unconscious, but we found him slumped against the mainmast and out cold."

The commanders let the subsequent silence linger. They allowed these pirates to let their imaginations run wild. They needed to see how the rookies filled in the gaps and what theories they crafted about what happened. In truth, none of them had an answer themselves. Buggy was tight-lipped about that day, not that they could bring themselves to pry too hard. The nervous aura from the rookies finally dissipated, expressions brightening as they spoke. "That's amazing...that means he saved them. Saved everyone."

"He must've fought hard to protect his crew. Hurt and with a Marine Battleship at the bow—damn."

"I wonder what the Marines did to knock everyone out. A concussive shot?"

"Had to be something like that. Those Marines didn't want to fight at all. And if they shot Captain Buggy with a sea prism bullet, they had to be desperate."

"They had to be *terrified*."

Cheering and celebration were building.

"Man, that Captain Buggy—what a pirate."

"What a hero!"

The commanders breathed out in relief but maintained composure as a few stragglers still had questions. "That's what you meant by scars?" One pirate asked. He had a hand over his chest, frowning. "He always seemed like he healed so fast, but he's still got one from that?"

Alvida shrugged, and Galdino saw his chance to speak. "I think it's more metaphorical. He still remembers it, and even though he came out on top, the Marines managed to injure him and his crew. And that, most likely, is the rage he still carries." Galdino pushed his glasses up his nose. "You see?"

A soft 'oooh' of understanding rippled through the remaining gathered pirates. They seemed satisfied with the explanation, having enough information now to form their conclusions. They too, returned to their tables to talk amongst themselves.

Finally, alone, the commanders each returned to their various drinks. They didn't embellish that story, and it saved their chairman face to tell it rather than offer a simple explanation. Simple could let someone stray too close to 'he's so terrified of these storms, so much so he can't even leave his tent.' No one had ever really accepted easy excuses anyway when it came to Buggy.

"It never gets easier telling that story," Mohji mumbled. The memories weren't exactly the best for them either, even if they had lived.

Off to one side, a prominent figure lurked in the shadows near open tent flaps, listening in. It was quite the story that Crocodile had never heard about the Cross Guild's figurehead. Not that the ex-warlord had anyone to blame but himself. He was always holed up in his quarters when it rained, and he stayed away from the main tent when it was loud and rowdy. Crocodile blew out a thick cloud of smoke, obscuring his face from curious onlookers now that the crowds were spreading out. The main tent was reaching its usual levels of music and merry again, meaning staying close by would be a headache.

So the ex-warlord turned back the way he'd come, back into the rain, and back towards the private tents that housed the Cross Guild's leadership.

"Even accounting for their usual exaggerations and fluff, that was an interesting one." Crocodile was walking with purpose, his path set for Buggy's tent. There was no shelter from the rain along the way, but getting wet was a price he'd pay to get answers. "I'll just have to find out what happened from another source." A source he could torment and interrogate behind closed doors. There were always reasons to bully Buggy. Having a new one was exciting enough to drive Crocodile out of hiding and after his favorite prey.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

The leadership of Cross Guild has a meeting, but doesn't really get much closer to the answers they want.

Chapter Notes

I've finalized the full layout for this story finally! As before, if there are missing tags or content warnings, please reach out and let me know. Thank you for the kind words as well, it's nice to know people are excited to read this story!

Crocodile didn't bother waiting for an invitation, opening the flap into Buggy's tent and letting himself in. It was sealed behind him before he reached into an inner pocket in his coat to get a new cigar. Sand swirled up from his feet as he flicked open his lighter, drying him as he lit the cigar. The thin wall of sand obscured his form, and he took his time enjoying the renewed taste of tobacco. Buggy's tent was dark, but the vibrant colors and array of patterns stood out even in that darkness, an offense to his senses. It was already threatening a headache, and he took a long drag from his cigar to stave it. He supposed it was bound to happen since they'd let Buggy do his decorating.

The chairman's tent was two stories, the robust framework built to support a second floor to separate Buggy's living space from his business. The entrance was arranged as a waiting room where Buggy would deliver more personalized reports to individual crews. Further back, there was what was supposed to be a more private office for the clown to get real work done, but Crocodile knew from experience it was not used for paperwork. No, instead, there was a faint whiff of oil and metal; the office had been turned into a workshop where Buggy pumped out all kinds of crazy inventions. Bombs had been banned after an unfortunate chemical fire, but weapons of all other shapes, sizes, and colors were still produced and paraded around the town.

The staircase to the next floor where Crocodile knew he'd find Buggy was also towards the back, and he had every intention of continuing his pursuit—but before that, he had to acknowledge he wasn't the first one here. Seated comfortably on a long couch was none other than Dracule Mihawk, surrounded by candles and holding a book and a glass of red wine. Crocodile arched a questioning brow before blowing out a thick smoke cloud. "The hell are you doing here, Hawk Eyes?"

The swordsman didn't acknowledge his partner right away, favoring a sip of his wine. Crocodile was used to Mihawk's eccentric behavior, but maybe this setup was leaning too hard into the 'vampire' rumors. "I'm guarding our chairman." The statement was matter-of-fact, and Mihawk looked like an unimpressed secretary.

The answer and reaction were different from what Crocodile had been expecting. He stepped closer to the seated figure, noting Yoru leaned against the couch beside him. "Why?" The two could not

deny their paranoid nature, but even Crocodile felt this was a bit much. They were housed in the depths of the clown's town, packed with devoted followers who would die for Buggy.

"You heard the story, correct? Of the escape from a hurricane while staring down a Marine battleship?"

Crocodile chuckled, smoke drifting from between his teeth. "After the fool sent his ship into a whirlpool? Aye, they told it in the main tent to entertain the newcomers." The sand man sat close to his partner on the couch and smirked when Mihawk had to adjust as the cushions dipped with his weight.

The swordsman cleared his throat, finally setting his book on the low table in front of the couch. "The story is supposed to inspire heroism, but they still reveal a significant injury he sustained." Mihawk swirled his wine in its delicate glass. "Buggy is an emperor now. And pirates are opportunists. We wouldn't want someone emboldened by that suggestion of weakness to come and kill the fool."

Crocodile's expression darkened, but he tried to dismiss the idea. "You honestly think it's true that he was shot?" The ex-warlords knew the clown was durable, but Crocodile had difficulty believing Buggy would've survived being so grievously wounded. And even if he had, there was no way the brat could've held himself together long enough to escape a pursuit. "I still can't tell what parts of that story are true. The Marines chasing them, yes, maybe even getting lucky with a storm, but not the rest. He's shown time and again he's a coward."

"Oh, it's all true," Mihawk confirmed, "he even bears the scars." The nearly empty glass was raised towards the ceiling. "The event was traumatic enough that he dreams about it too." Yellow eyes blinked, then looked down to his free hand in his lap as he pondered. "I wonder if I should ask him about it."

What did that mean? Ask him about it.

"You've seen scars; you're here guarding him... you've never asked him what happened?" It almost sounded like amusement seeping into Crocodile's words, smothering a budding frustration. It would not surprise him if this man had never bothered to talk to Buggy. Hell, he wouldn't usually go out of his way, either. Prying wasn't something they made a habit of. "Wait, have you ever gone up there to check on him?"

"No." Simple, curt, as if it was an obvious fact. "I can monitor him with my haki, so there's no reason to."

After the Cross Guild was formed, Crocodile had begrudgingly agreed to learn haki from his partner. They still needed to start that training, the sand man always deflecting it with guild work. He was beginning to regret it, thanks to the reminders of Mihawk's complete lack of social awareness and etiquette.

Without that training, he couldn't see--feel-- the brat like Mihawk could. "Just because his heart is still beating doesn't mean he's okay." Crocodile had to check on the chairman himself. With Mihawk confirming the story as legitimate, he was even more curious to get a complete picture of this supposed miracle escape from death. A final drag off his cigar before Crocodile leaned forward to snub it in an ashtray. He stood up, smoothing his vest as he headed for the stairs. Mihawk, with his solitude restored, returned to his book.

Just as the lower level was dark, so were Buggy's private quarters. Crocodile was thankful for the lamps left near the top of the stairs, lighting one to carry with him as he searched for his prey.

There was a fully equipped bathroom and a small kitchen, the fridge no doubt stocked with all sorts of sweets and brightly colored drinks. The clown was always getting them as gifts; somehow, he could stomach all that sugar. It was like Buggy had never really grown out of those childish cravings.

The ex-warlord didn't bother investigating those areas, moving forward to the thick canvas that split the upper floor. The other half of the room was dedicated as Buggy's sleeping area, and he had to duck through the open flap to get in. Like the rest of the tent, the darkness couldn't contain the vibrancy of Buggy's choice of furniture and decorations. A lavish, moderately sized bed was at the center of the room, covered in blue sheets and what looked like circus print pillows. A line of vanity mirrors was suspended along one wall with storage and counter space beneath. No doubt where the clown kept all of his flashy cosmetics. Strewn about was circus memorabilia, batons, hoops, balls, and even extra ropes hanging from above; the entire room looked like its own little circus.

And its ringleader was missing. Crocodile lifted the lantern a bit as he peered at the bed, noting that it was empty. Mihawk had said Buggy was here, so he'd expected to find the other man sleeping. He wasn't wrong in that assumption, either—only the part about where the brat had passed out.

Costumes and tools of all colors and shapes covered the walls, posters and collectibles, bookcases overstuffed, and a desk piled with maps and papers—finally, Crocodile found his prize. A plain hammock was suspended on the far side of the room, and Buggy was curled up inside.

Nothing about the chairman looked relaxed; Buggy had a loose, sleeveless shit on, with some of his ridiculous striped pants and suspenders. He still had his shoes on, and his makeup hadn't been washed off, though it was heavily smudged. Crocodile could tell the other man was shaking, with a sheen of sweat refracting the lantern's light as it was swept over the sleeping form. No, Buggy did not look good at all.

"Why do you always have to be such a pain." Long fingers curled into one side of the hammock and flipped it, dumping Buggy unceremoniously to the floor. The reaction was expected: a startled cry, scrambling, and two knives clutched tightly in gloved hands, ready to kill. When the lantern light hit Buggy's face, the knives were dropped, and he shoved his face into his hands.

"Fuck! Crocodile, you bastard, what's the big idea?!"

The giant man didn't answer, stepping away to light some lamps strewn about before hanging his lantern on a suspended hook.

Buggy continued to curse and complain on the ground until he finally dropped his hands and tried to push himself to his feet. He was being watched and scrutinized, and when he couldn't find his footing, the back of his shirt was grabbed so he didn't fall flat on his face.

"What's wrong with you, clown?"

"Urg... it's not like you were gentle waking me up," Buggy grumbled. He was hanging in Crocodile's grasp like a rag doll. The stillness and silence were against the brat's nature and unnerved Crocodile. Instead of commenting, he started walking with his suspended captive.

"Hey—where are you taking me?"

"Nowhere. You need to clean up before you're put to bed properly."

Buggy was tossed into the washroom, though Crocodile had to snag the suspenders with his hook to stop the other man from falling. This was getting annoying. "Can you handle yourself, or will I have to do it for you?" The golden hook glinted dangerously. "I won't be gentle." He pulled the suspenders, then released them so they snapped against Buggy's back. The clown finally showed some life, yelping before turning and shoving Crocodile out. "Give me a minute!"

A minute, then.

Metal tin and lighter were retrieved, and Crocodile allowed himself another cigar. He was running low already—he'd have to get Daz to work on importing a new supply. Maybe he'd even join the crew and buy them himself. Crocodile hadn't been off of Karai Bari island since he'd arrived with Mihawk, and he was beginning to think it was affecting his judgment. He waited as promised until Buggy re-emerged. His face was washed, and long hair had been combed out. Damp clothes had been exchanged for fresh sleep clothes: soft striped pants and a colorful tank top, much like the rest of the clown's casual wardrobe.

"I wish you wouldn't smoke in here." Buggy was brushing past Crocodile and nearly got away. The gold hook caught the chairman's shoulder, turning slowly so the sharp tip ghosted his neck.
"You're brazen today, clown."

He expected Buggy to use his Devil Fruit powers to escape while whining and apologizing. When it didn't happen, Crocodile moved the hook away, confused and...disappointed? It had to be that because he was not worrying about this coward. "I've got some questions for you. Go sit down on the bed."

Buggy wrapped his arms around himself, and Crocodile could hear the shorter man grumbling as he retreated to his bed. There were the complaints he'd wanted. And they were ignored, the ex-warlord following close behind to shove Buggy into the soft sheets once he was close enough.

Shocked protests went unheard as the golden hook pressed against shoulder blades to hold the chairman still. Hands and head left their place, and Buggy gripped the front of Crocodile's vest, face red and teeth bared. "What are you doing?!" Crocodile had snagged the bottom of Buggy's loose tank top and pulled it up to reveal his back.

"Hey! You pervert what—?!"

Clear as day, an angry scar marred otherwise flawless skin. Crocodile ran a thumb over the mark, causing the clown to choke and the hold on his vest to tighten. He watched the way the other's back arched to escape the touch, and a glance at Buggy's face showed he was nearly as red as his nose.

"So this part was true." Taking advantage of the stunned silence, Crocodile turned Buggy over, repeating the process of hiking up his shirt to check for a matching scar. Shaky hands returned to wrists and gripped the gold hook now pressing against his collarbone. Buggy's head drifted down and popped back onto his neck. "S-stop!" The protests came out as a weak squeak and were again dismissed.

"What, embarrassed?" The second scar was a bit more jagged, an old exit wound. Again, it was touched, and Buggy whimpered under him. "So, a sea prism bullet? I'm surprised you survived."

"O-of course I did!" Buggy spit. It sounded like he was regaining some of his voice. Crocodile continued his light touches to the spot regardless, noting the other's skin was unusually warm. "Three millimeters to the left," two fingers pointed left, "and it would have killed me." The prone clown grinned, then spread his arms like he was presenting himself. "But it wasn't my day to die! Fortune favored me, and now—"

Crocodile moved his hook to press against Buggy's neck, quieting him before he could launch into a spree of boasting. "Speaking of that day, clown, I have a few questions." He'd let the brat get cleaned up and comfortable, and now he could finally question him without distraction. He would not be dissuaded by Buggy's expression dropping into nervousness and discomfort. The hook was touched again, a finger stroking along the tip as sea-blue eyes were averted. "Well, you heard it from Mohji and Cabaji, didn't you? They never skimp out on the details about that fight. There isn't anything left to tell."

"Wrong." Crocodile took his hook away, leaving Buggy to fidget uncomfortably under scrutiny. "Your old crew didn't have the end to the story." He sat on the bed, watching Buggy sit up and push himself back into his pillows and headboard. He did not want to be near Crocodile, but the ex-warlord was not giving him a choice. "So out with it. I'll pretend everything with the storm and you nearly sinking two marine ships is true. What I want to know—"

"It is true," Buggy growled. "There's nothing more to tell Crocodile. All of that happened. If you don't believe it, why would I waste my breath telling it again?" There was venom and a bitterness to the smaller man's tone that Crocodile wasn't used to hearing. Coupled with what Mihawk had told him earlier...

A thick cloud of smoke was blown out towards Buggy, making the clown gag and cough as Crocodile sighed. "Alright. Hawk Eyes did already confirm it, so calm down."

"Huh??! Then what are you asking?!"

"I already told you," Crocodile leaned over to loom over the chairman. Buggy sunk, sliding until he was flat on his back again with the ex-warlord above him. "This is the last time I ask nicely. How did you escape?"

"Uh, well," Buggy's hands were grasping at pillows and the sheets beneath him as he tried to look anywhere besides Crocodile's face. "I—that is I uh..." There was nowhere for the clown to escape, but it was amusing to watch Buggy squirm. Finally, the chairman took a deep breath to steady frayed nerves. "I don't...know."

Crocodile turned his hook so it caught the light, and it was quickly grabbed by a chopped hand. "Hey! Threaten me all you want, but it's the truth. Getting shot, that much I remember." Buggy's remaining hand came up to grip his loose top right over the scar. "But after that, it's blank. My crew said I was unconscious for three days, and even then, I don't remember the first time I woke up."

As much as he didn't like the explanation, Crocodile could see Buggy wasn't lying. The other man was never good at taming his expressions, so the discomfort at admitting such weakness was fully displayed. And the clown continued, eyes narrowing. "They said I had a high fever. It scared them enough that they turned the Big Top to the closest island they could find to look for a doctor. Being hunted by Marines be damned, they honestly thought I would die."

"A good thing they were wrong."

Crocodile jerked back to sit up straight as Buggy's body split in surprise. Mihawk had joined them, carrying a tray laden with a bowl, pitcher, and a few glasses. Those and a chair were brought to the side of the clown's bed. As the tray was set down, Crocodile noticed some wash clothes and a cold compress.

"You looked comfortable." Mihawk was looking at his partner, and Crocodile stood up from the bed. "Shut up. What do you want?"

On the bed, Buggy was reforming, but it sounded like he was still trying to steady his breathing after the sudden interruption. It didn't help when the second of his tormentors leaned over him, pressing a finger to a shoulder to keep the clown lying flat. "I came to help with your interrogation."

"I-I-I-Interrogation?!" That finger moved from shoulder to lips, silencing Buggy's stammering.

"Well, you're too late." Crocodile stepped away to put out his cigar, trying to hide his frustration. He'd been enjoying tormenting the clown, and Mihawk was the last person he wanted catching him doing it. The swordsman knew him too well and wasn't afraid to call him out for his ulterior motives. "The brat doesn't remember anything. I doubt he's lying."

Mihawk hummed, pouring a glass of water and offering it to Buggy. The clown hesitated, glancing between the two ex-warlords before he sat up and accepted the drink. "So I heard. But he does remember being shot. Right, Buggy?" Golden eyes never left the chairman. There was no immediate answer, Buggy beginning to sweat again noticeably under the gaze of both men now. He delayed answering by drinking slowly, but the glass was taken away once empty. His only shield was gone. "Yeah, um, I remember that."

Mihawk nodded, still not looking away. "Close your eyes for a moment."

The command was followed, although Buggy looked as confused as Crocodile felt. Still, the sand man didn't interrupt, crossing his arms and letting Mihawk take control. "Good. Now, think back to that day. The rain, the heat...what could you smell?" As he spoke, the swordsman dipped his fingers in the water bowl and ghosted the tips over Buggy's face, letting water run down his cheek and neck. His other hand hovered over the hidden scar on the clown's chest, and Crocodile saw their chairman flinch. "There was...smoke. Phosphorus. We were still close to those cruisers, so it was strong. Something sweet, too. The Buggy Balls all contain special mixtures...one might not have detonated correctly."

Mihawk hummed an affirmative, moving his wet hand behind Buggy. He pressed the old wound from both sides lightly. "The smells were strong then. You could probably taste them."

Buggy choked and took a steady breath before he continued. "I could, but then—salt and metal. My chest burned, and I couldn't breathe."

"I'd imagine not," Mihawk said softly, "at this angle, they punctured one of your lungs."

"I felt sick at the same time. Like the sea had come up and was trying to drown me. I couldn't feel my arms and legs, but somehow everything still hurt."

Crocodile walked closer, slowly, quietly, as he kept a close eye on what Mihawk was doing. The swordsman had changed his hold, supporting Buggy's weight as the other seemed to tilt forward. Blue hair was sticking to the chairman's neck and curtaining his face. His breathing sounded labored.

"And where was your mind?" Mihawk prompted.

Something was starting to look—feel—off. Crocodile could see Buggy was sweating even more now, the pained expression shifting to something darker. "I...I was angry." Buggy's voice was barely above a whisper. Crocodile licked his lips, the air suddenly tasting like ozone. "I had just done something great. Insane, but amazing. I'd pulled my ship through a maelstrom and crippled two Marine cruisers."

Mihawk shifted so he sat further on the bed and could better support Buggy. The clown was

moving like he was going to stand, sitting on his knees. Mihawk's wrist was gripped by one of Buggy's shaking hands. However, the swordsman did not move his hand, still covering the jagged scar. "Those bastards... they'd already lost and shot me anyway. Not to mention the battleship, those cowards—"

Crocodile felt something, an odd pressure in his ears.

"My crew still needed me. We had to escape."

"Hawk Eyes."

"And to do that, every last one of those Marines needed to—!"

"Hawk Eyes!"

Mihawk brought his hand up from Buggy's back and struck his neck. All at once, the strange taste and pressure left, and Crocodile's jaw went slack as the chairman crumpled. Mihawk looked as calm and collected as always, but a new interest was alight in those dangerous eyes.

"Hey!" Crocodile grabbed the swordsman's shoulder to turn him around. "Why the hell did you do that?"

Mihawk blinked, seeming surprised his partner was still there. "Oh. Well, his fever was spiking." With his arm still tucked under the slumped form, Mihawk could lift Buggy and toss him onto his back again. The clown's face, and even visible skin, were beet red. Crocodile could almost see the heat radiating off their chairman, and even the unusual red nose seemed to glow. "He's had it since this morning. I thought with some rest, he might sweat it out."

"You...what?" Crocodile's hand was shrugged off as Mihawk turned his full attention back to Buggy. He rearranged the plush pillows and settled Buggy's head into them, sweeping the long blue hair out from under him. One of the wash clothes was picked up to dab the sweat from Buggy's face and neck. The larger ex-warlord watched Mihawk work, frustration and something boiling in his chest. "You knew. You knew he was sick."

"I knew he had a fever. I don't know if it means he's ill."

Crocodile rolled his eyes. "You knew this," he motioned to the bed, to the clown that Mihawk was now tucking under blankets, "was going to happen."

"I had a hunch." The cold compress was lifted from the tray and laid against Buggy's forehead. Crocodile swore he could see steam come from under it. "I thought it best to prepare."

A large hand covered Crocodile's face. He took a deep, steady breath, then dragged it down as he growled. Idiots. Each in their own way, his two fellow leaders were idiots. Turning on his heels, the heavy coat on Crocodile's shoulders swirled as he walked quickly towards the stairs. "Stay with him, you imbecile. I'll go find a doctor."

"Of course." Mihawk was already perfectly prepared for the job. He'd brought the water and wash clothes—really, Crocodile had to get out of Buggy's tent before his flaring temper had him turn on the swordsman.

He stormed out the front, and somehow, Crocodile was unsurprised when Daz appeared beside him. If anything, it was a comfort knowing that someone competent was always so close at hand. "Tell me we have a doctor on this island. An actual doctor, not just someone who can do basic first aid."

The solemn man was walking a step behind his boss, but Crocodile could practically feel him thinking, combing over a mental roster of the allied crews to find what they needed. "We do. Madam Zara."

Crocodile frowned. "The toxicologist?"

"Yes, but that isn't her only specialty." Crocodile only knew her for the poison she provided for his hook. He hadn't realized she could do more. "Fine. We need to bring her back to the chairman's tent. Don't let anyone near us on the way there or back." Crocodile wanted to smoke, but it was still raining. He had to wait. "We don't need anyone spreading rumors and sending this place into a frenzy."

It was unfortunate enough already with the Cross Guild workers thinking Buggy was isolating himself for their own good. If they found out he was ill, maybe injured or worse—that was chaos they were not ready to deal with.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

It's a miracle the circus town has a real doctor. Not that she has much to offer besides theories and warnings. Mihawk and Crocodile have to make plans for the present and future of how they handle Buggy. Crocodile isn't okay, and Mihawk calling him out doesn't help.

I really appreciate your kind comments, and please enjoy the new chapter!

Madam Zara was a character all her own. Though she wore the typical white coat of a doctor, her face had long scars, and she had a head of fluffy white hair. It almost looked like the doctor had curled horns like a goat's, but it had to be how her hair was styled. Crocodile wouldn't have been surprised if they were real, considering she was part of Buggy's original crew. The clown always boasted about having the best of the best regarding the world's freaks.

She seemed to share the clown's dangerous interest in unstable chemicals and intimidating experiments with all things deadly and unknown. Her office looked more like a mad scientist's lab than a place for treatment. Still, she admitted she was a trained physician, gathering a few tools and jars into a leather bag as Crocodile explained the situation. The woman roped Daz into helping her pack, much to Crocodile's chagrin; someone else giving orders to his right-hand man felt disrespectful. However, Buggy was back in his tent and needed Madam Zara's expertise, so he let the woman do as she pleased. He whispered to Daz to watch out for any vials labeled with skulls. Many of them were mixed among medicines, which made Crocodile nervous.

"Alright, take me to the captain. And don't worry, I know this needs to be discrete." Madam Zara brushed aside the half-threats that Crocodile had prepared before they could be uttered. "Be ready to answer my questions when we arrive, Sir Crocodile. I doubt Captain Buggy is in any condition to speak to me himself."

Well, she was right. Crocodile resigned himself to taking orders from the doctor for now. He would pass the responsibility onto Mihawk when they returned to Buggy's tent. The swordsman had been monitoring the chairman all day, so he'd be better equipped for an interrogation.

The walk back was short, but Crocodile wasn't any less pissed off as he summoned his sands to dry off again. He stalked after the doctor and Daz back upstairs, closing the small cyclone of sand in his fist once he wasn't dripping wet anymore.

Mihawk was seated precisely where he'd been left in Buggy's room. Right beside the clown's bed, watching the unconscious man with unwavering focus. Even as Madam Zara walked up beside his chair, the swordsman didn't look away, though he did move Yoru from where it was resting against the bed. "Good afternoon, Doctor Zara."

"Lord Mihawk. I see you've retained some of our lessons." She nodded to the tray beside the bed. Madam Zara did not seem shocked at the sight of the unconscious chairman. Instead, there was a light of recognition in her eyes as she took a pair of spectacles from inside her coat. "Boy, this brings me back." She murmured, reaching under the sheets to retrieve one of Buggy's arms, feeling

the underside of his wrist. "Davy Jones' beard, he's warm. Do either of you know when this started?" As she asked, the sheets were tossed off, and she moved her hand to press against Buggy's forehead. Once the unconscious clown was uncovered, it felt like the temperature in the entire tent went up.

"He's had a slight fever all day." Mihawk supplied. Crocodile stepped forward and set a hand on his partner's shoulder. "It got worse after Hawk Eyes riled him up." The swordsman tensed but didn't argue. Crocodile was right, after all.

"Uh-huh. Any other obvious symptoms? Or anything unusual?"

Crocodile looked down at Mihawk, waiting. When he didn't speak, Crocodile shook the swordsman's shoulder lightly. Mihawk didn't make a sound, and after a few moments, Madam Zara turned to observe them both. "Well?" No response, not from either ex-warlord. Daz looked lost near the entrance, but Crocodile and Mihawk seemed *guilty*.

The doctor sighed. So much for getting answers from the pair. "Alright. You two, go wait downstairs." Crocodile and Mihawk were being dismissed. Daz Bones was motioned to take their place. "Young man, you stay. I'm going to need your strength."

Daz hesitated as his two bosses left the bedside. Mihawk's expression was stiff when he walked out, and Crocodile looked exhausted. "We need that clown alive, so help her out."

"Yes sir," Daz bowed, then moved from his post by the entrance. Crocodile ducked out of the room and followed Mihawk to the stairs as he searched his coat pockets.

Lamps were lit downstairs, and Crocodile paced from Buggy's workshop to the front room to burn his frustration and nervous energy. Back and forth, long strides, but quiet footsteps. Mihawk had sat back down on the couch, clearly deep in thought. "What's wrong with you?" Crocodile had lit his last cigar, taking it from his mouth to regard his partner across the room. "Regretting not telling her about what happened?"

"Hm? Oh, not at all," Mihawk waved the suggestion off quickly. Of course the swordsman wasn't worried about that. Crocodile wasn't surprised, walking closer to stand by the couch with smoke trailing from between his lips. "Then what are you thinking about, Hawk Eyes?"

"Haoshoku." A near-immediate answer. Silence followed, and Crocodile had to resist rolling his eyes. He was still learning when he needed to be more specific with his questions and when to prompt for further explanation. "And what the hell is that?"

Mihawk blinked, holding his own chin in thought. "Haki."

Crocodile counted to seven under his breath. "Oh, that." He knew what haki was but had no idea how 'Haoshoku' was related. "Could you clarify? It's been a while since you told me about that stuff."

"That's right, we still need to start your training." Mihawk motioned for Crocodile to sit beside him, and the other ex-warlord obeyed. Once again, they sat hip to hip, and Mihawk allowed himself to slide subtly until he rested against Crocodile's side. "What do you remember?"

"Not much. I remember there was armament and observation. One was for hardening your spirit as a weapon or armor. The other was sensing your opponents, reading emotions, and gauging

strength. Something like that?"

"Well...yes. But there was still a third type."

Crocodile held his cigar away from his lips. "Yeah, you mentioned it. You said only people born with it could use it, though, so I didn't retain any of that."

"Ah." Mihawk glanced up at Crocodile, looking mildly put off at the admittance that his previous explanations had been ignored. Crocodile nudged the swordsman, smirking after he'd stuck his cigar back between his teeth. "Don't pout. I'll listen, tell me."

Mihawk looked down at his hands, then sighed. "Haoshoku. It's Conquer's haki."

Crocodile hummed, confirming he was listening and trying to prompt the swordsman to keep talking. It didn't work. "And why are you thinking about it?"

"Buggy has it."

Though the responses were clipped, those three words somehow held so much weight. "...what? The Conquer's spirit? Don't you think he's too weak for that?"

"It's not a matter of strength, remember?" Mihawk looked up at the ceiling, and Crocodile followed his gaze. "It's about their will." There was a new excitement in Mihawk's voice, so Crocodile set his hand around his partner's shoulders to steady him and assure him he could continue. "I wouldn't begin to know how to train him to use it, but it's worth trying. If he could learn to release it at will, it would render any weak-minded fool who stood before him defenseless. It wouldn't matter if he could match them in a fight as long as he has the *will* to crush them."

Buggy did have an impressive drive to live and fight for what he *really* wanted when it came down to it. Both of them had seen it firsthand, and that spirit was what inspired droves of followers to continue showing up to work under the clown every day.

Crocodile felt Mihawk shifting and looked down to see fingers wrapped around his hook. "He might even be a match for Red Hair Shanks." The cigar was nearly crushed between square, white teeth. "That's part of Shanks' strength, after all. Not many can sense—" That hand on Mihawk's shoulder gripped tighter, and the swordsman jolted, stopping. "I'd prefer to be the one to kill that bastard." Crocodile had heard more than enough grief from Buggy and Mihawk about Shanks. Broken dreams and disappointment were always delivered with that man's easy smile. Crocodile could feel sharp golden eyes on him and realized he was letting his emotions bleed out too heavily.

"Sorry."

"Don't be. It's cute when you get angry for me. Mihawk really did know Crocodile too well. He tried not to look at the swordsman. The ceiling was motioned to again. "For him, too."

"Don't."

Mihawk reached up and grabbed Crocodile's jaw to turn his head. "It's easier when you admit it. I already did."

"That's news to me," Crocodile growled, removing his hand from Mihawk's shoulder to take his cigar from his mouth.

"Is it?"

In truth, it wasn't news. Crocodile had known for a while his partner had a fondness for the idiot they used as their figurehead. And dammit, maybe he did share some of those feelings, but that didn't mean he wanted it said *out loud*.

Their eyes were locked in silent challenge. Mihawk's grip was harsh, and Crocodile couldn't pull away. They stayed like that for seconds, a minute—Crocodile blinked first, and Mihawk smirked.

"Later, Hawk Eyes..." It sounded like a threat, but it was really a plea for mercy. Mihawk let him go, and Crocodile massaged his jaw. He needed to change the subject.

"Earlier, when you were questioning Buggy. Was that pressure his haki?" He tried to return to a subject of interest, and sure enough, that intense, excited light returned to Mihawk's eyes. "It was. Considering what we heard, the crew passing out should have made it obvious." Crocodile relaxed, letting his partner talk. "Him not being aware he has it also explains why he's so weakened after using it. His body isn't strong enough to handle it yet."

"Yet?"

Mihawk nodded, "When I train you, I'll train him in both types of haki as well. I may be unable to help him control conqueror's haki, but getting him used to armament and observation could help. Physical training will be necessary, too."

Crocodile laughed low, enjoying the usually stoic swordsman's small show of genuine excitement. "Well, if that power can sink a Marine battleship, we should do everything we can to teach him to use it. I promise I'll listen, too."

Mihawk opened his mouth to speak but cut himself off and frowned. He looked troubled, thinking, and eagerness faded as quickly as it had appeared. Crocodile startled, leaning forward to examine Mihawk's face. "What's wrong? Something I said?"

"No, not...entirely. Sinking a Marine battleship, though, I don't think the conqueror's spirit can do that. Not... Buggy's, at least."

But if that was the case, then... "So, does he not have it?"

"No, he does. I'm sure of it. But it had to be something else that allowed him to sink those ships and escape."

Crocodile took a long pull from his cigar, leaning his head back to blow the cloud of smoke above them. Why, why was Mihawk like this? Everyone thought the swordsman was collected, composed, and elegant. Crocodile knew of his partner's ever-aimless thoughts, fleeting awareness, and awkwardness when anyone tried to converse with the swordsman. He was as much of a handful as Buggy. And yet Crocodile sat there, exhausted and somehow enamored by both idiots. Now, they both had things to think about. Mihawk on theories of Buggy's potential and Crocodile on the migraine building behind his eyes. The rest of their wait was spent in comfortable silence. Crocodile finished his final cigar, though the inability to light another did not help his pounding head. Mihawk's presence beside him helped, a temporary balm for his apprehension about the unwell chairman upstairs.

It was an hour before Daz came down, inviting the two Cross Guild leaders back upstairs. Madam

Zara was waiting for them at Buggy's bedside, looking as tired and frustrated as Crocodile felt. An IV hung beside the bed going into Buggy's arm, and from what Crocodile could tell, the brat's clothes had been changed again. "He's stable, for now." The doctor assured the pair. "We had to cool him off, and he's severely dehydrated. I took what samples I could, but it will take me time to grow cultures to get definitive answers." She pinned the pair of ex-warlords down with an accusing look. "This doesn't seem like something food-borne or a virus. Whatever you did, don't do it again. I've seen him with a fever like this once before, but a life-threatening injury accompanied it." She motioned to Buggy's chest. "I was the one they found to treat that wound. It was how I came to join the Big Top."

Neither admitted to what they'd done, but they did give subtle nods, confirming they'd heed her warning. Madam Zara sighed, standing and inviting one of them to take her chair. Mihawk accepted gratefully while Crocodile stood with arms crossed, restlessly tapping a finger against his forearm. "My past hypothesis was a combination of external stresses and his devil fruit. He's the only one I've ever observed this in and the only one from the old crew with those powers."

It was Crocodile's turn to sigh. "So his old injury..." Even though he hadn't been the one to trigger the fever, he'd still been manhandling Buggy earlier to get a good look at the scars. It stirred up enough guilt that he couldn't stop from asking. "Could it be causing any of this?"

"It's agitated." Madam Zara confirmed. "I don't know why. It's not unheard of that nerves can take a few years to regrow. They could be caught in the scar tissue, which would cause significant pain as feeling returns."

Great. Crocodile shot a look at Mihawk, but all he could see were the swordsman's straight shoulders. He was being pointedly ignored. "Whatever the cause, he needs to be watched. If his temperature gets too high, he'll cook from inside out. Understand?"

"Yeah, I got it." Crocodile knew from experience how deadly heat alone could be, thanks to his time in Arabasta. "Anything else?"

"Just that I'm going to continue to borrow this young man. Come along, Mr. Bones." There was no room for arguing. Daz still waited for Crocodile's final okay, then he bowed to the two ex-warlords and followed the doctor once it was given.

Once the pair was sure they were alone, they checked on Buggy for themselves. Mihawk combed his fingers through long blue hair, noting it was wet. "They must've submerged him in cold water. I doubt he'll wake up any time soon."

Crocodile walked forward, grabbing Mihawk's chair to tip him out of it so he could take over. The swordsman caught himself and retreated to the other side of the bed with as much grace as he could muster, side-eyeing his partner. The taller man ignored him, gathering blue strands into his open palm and letting his sand swirl up and caress them gently. The excess moisture was gradually absorbed, leaving Buggy's hair soft and warm.

"So, we're stuck babysitting now."

Mihawk had been transfixed, watching Crocodile dry Buggy's hair, and it took a moment for the statement to register. "Right. That is what Doctor Zara said." Mihawk's response was almost a question, meaning he likely hadn't listened too closely when the doctor explained *why* they needed to watch Buggy. Crocodile shot Mihawk an exasperated look, which caused the swordsman to look down and clear his throat. "I suppose we should move him if we need to spend so much time at his

bedside."

"Why?"

The room was motioned to, and Crocodile could hear the argument before his partner spoke. "I know being in here is already overstimulating you too." Astute as always, Mihawk was right. The bright colors and contrasting patterns were hard to look at. Even worse, Crocodile had nothing else to smoke, which meant he had nothing to distract him from the aggravating decor. "Your tent should be fine-"

"No." Mihawk cut the other off immediately. "Yours is closer. Everything you own is larger, too." Mihawk sat on the bed, looking pointedly at Crocodile's hand. The sand man had finished drying and was absentmindedly stroking the soft blue hair between his fingers.

Crocodile froze, then dropped the hair and covered his face. "Shut up, Hawk Eyes."

"I didn't say anything."

"I'm serious. Don't push me yet." Yet. It was tentatively added but present all the same. Crocodile was still trying to adjust to the idea of this...unfortunate affection they both shared.

Mihawk slid off the bed and returned to stand beside his partner. Crocodile wrapped an arm around him when he felt a tap on his shoulder. He tried to drag the swordsman into his lap to embarrass him, but Mihawk didn't budge, standing straight and rooted. Spoilsport.

"Fine. I want to talk to him when he wakes up anyway. Without interruptions." They wouldn't have to worry about people wandering into Crocodile's private quarters. Not unless they had a death wish. "Until then, we have another problem. Figuring out what to tell everyone else while the brat is bedridden. I doubt he will recover in a day, and I don't want mass panic spreading."

Mihawk nodded, then pat Crocodile's back. It was the silent signal that crafting those stories would be left up to Crocodile himself. He'd known that, but having the job *officially* foisted onto him was disappointing all the same.

"I swear you will both drive me to an early grave. If that happens, you will be coming with me, Hawk Eyes."

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Weird things are still happening, but Buggy wakes up! Surely he'll have some answers.

It took Madam Zara the rest of the day to finish her tests. As predicted, they yielded no further answers to Buggy's fever. After seeing the chairman moved to Crocodile's tent the following day, she reiterated her hypothesis. The clown was likely overworked, and the building stress had finally caught up with him. She also mentioned his devil fruit again but was talking more to herself as she wondered aloud if it could be reacting to the weather. She knew about Crocodile's reluctance to step outside in the rain and mused it might be similar.

Whatever the reason, both ex-warlords were charged with watching over him since they wanted this illness kept a secret. "Let me be clear," the woman commandeered the two's attention for one final warning, "don't stress him out any further. His fever is still awful and will worsen if you don't let him rest."

Despite all their power, Mihawk and Crocodile were pressured to agree. Madam Zara was their only doctor—other rare and dangerous talents aside—so they knew it was wise to keep her happy.

"We need to get more doctors." Crocodile groused once Daz returned from seeing Madam Zara out. Mihawk arched a brow at his partner. "Does she make you that nervous?"

"No," Crocodile snapped. "We have a lot of people working under us. Imagine if a fourth of them ended up in the same state as him." He motioned to Buggy, who was lying in Crocodile's bed. "Ships with their own personal doctors won't cut it. Daz."

"Sir." Daz was back at his post by the room's entrance, ready and waiting for his master's orders.

"I trust you can handle the task. Start with our territories and see who we can recruit. I'd prefer civilians. But pirate or criminal, it won't matter if we secure their loyalty." Money, fear, power, status—Cross Guild had plenty of resources to spare, and Crocodile wouldn't hesitate to put them to use. His business partners certainly never held back. Daz accepted the order with a bow, leaving the room without another word.

Mihawk crossed his arms, watching Crocodile. "You do realize he was the only other option we had to help us, right?"

"Yeah, and?" Crocodile walked to his desk, opening a top drawer and taking out an ornate box. "You weren't going to get out of some extra work Hawk Eyes." Not that Mihawk usually handled any of the day-to-day. "We'll take shifts watching the brat. I'll even be nice and handle public appearances. But that means you'll have to help filter requests and confirm bounties." Crocodile knew the swordsman would suffer in silence while handling some paperwork and speaking with a few captains, but it served him right for causing this in the first place. "You can do all that in the comfort of your tent, but I'd prefer you visit the docks at least once daily. Without Buggy parading

around at all hours of the day, they'll need reminders that they're still working for us."

Crocodile remained at his desk, leaning against it as he lit a cigar. The swordsman was quiet, moving to the other side of the large bed as if he could escape from view and thus shirk the responsibilities. All it did was open up a spot for Crocodile to bring a chair and settle in at the bedside. "Well?"

Mihawk pursed his lips, brow twitching. "Fine." The swordsman wasn't happy but could only withhold an answer if he left the tent. And he didn't seem willing to abandon the unconscious chairman just yet. Crocodile grinned. "Good. Now, about our clown..."

The discussion on who would be in charge of what when caring for Buggy was more in-depth. Mihawk didn't try to use the opportunity to torment his partner, but he wasn't shy about his desires. If Crocodile let the swordsman have his way, Mihawk would end up overwhelmed and possibly in the bed next to Buggy. He wasn't about to let two Cross Guild leaders get ordered onto bed rest and leave *him* with all the work.

Establishing a schedule to watch the idiot might have been easier if they knew when he would wake up. Madam Zara hadn't given specifics, which meant Crocodile would have to sleep on his couch or in Mihawk's tent until further notice. He was not returning to that circus show that was Buggy's room.

"There's still plenty of room in your bed."

Crocodile jolted, then frowned and fixed Mihawk with a glare. While he was lost in thought, the swordsman had made himself comfortable, lying beside Buggy and watching him sleep. "I'm a lot bigger than either of you." Crocodile pointed out.

Mihawk had volunteered to watch over Buggy for the rest of the day, so he had no intention of staying. Crocodile could still feel his partner's eyes boring into his back as he left but refused to turn around for the swordsman to get any final free hits against his self-control. One of them had to stay focused on keeping Cross Guild afloat.

With plenty to be done, Crocodile decided to find Buggy's commanders and give them new orders. Their free ride was over without their old Captain to protect them.

A lot happened in six hours. Crocodile returned to Mihawk, dripping wet and clearly overwhelmed. After he'd helped get everything cleaned up, the taller man coaxed a sparse explanation out of his partner before sending him off to bed. The fever, it turned out, was inducing nightmares and causing hallucinations. Even if Buggy opened his eyes, Mihawk explained that he was not awake. Mihawk hadn't known what to do, but the fever had spiked, so he'd dragged Buggy to a cold bath. The reaction to the water had been...unpleasant, to say the least.

With the warning, at least if there were a repeat episode during the night, Crocodile had some idea what to do. Truthfully, he didn't want to deal with frantic hallucinations. Flailing limbs and panicked pleas--no, he didn't want to have to try and contain that on the first night.

Good luck or bad, Crocodile got his wish. Along with that wish came Buggy's condition not improving, although Madam Zara assured them he wasn't getting worse either. Two whole days where nothing changed. Then, Crocodile was in charge for the night once again.

The ex-warlord was exhausted and had left his chair by the bed to stretch and get coffee. Three days with no sleep and the extra duties were wearing down his immense stores of stamina.

When he turned back around, Buggy was sitting up. The clown was panting, sweat dripping down his face, and staring ahead in abject terror. Crocodile bound across the room, coffee forgotten, and calling the clown's name. Mihawk had been right; the other's eyes were distant, unresponsive, and Crocodile couldn't begin to guess what the chairman was seeing. "Hey! Can you hear me, brat?"

Buggy started to lean forward, and Crocodile grabbed his shoulder to hold him still. A noticeable heat radiated off the younger man, and Crocodile cursed. He did not want to dump this idiot in a cold bath. Crocodile hated the water and wasn't sure he could control Buggy if the other fought against him.

"Please," Buggy's voice was raspy from disuse. Crocodile had to tighten his hold as the clown started to struggle. "Please, Captain!" Despite being sick, Buggy had a surprising amount of strength. He broke away and nearly dove off the bed. Crocodile had to chase him and bodily pinned Buggy down, growling low. "Whatever you're seeing, it's not real Buggy. Calm down!"

But his words weren't reaching the chairman. Buggy was violent under him, and he caught an elbow to the chin before he could get the clown under control. Crocodile had flipped him onto his back, snagging both wrists in his hand to restrain them. The ex-warlord knew Buggy could escape with his devil fruit powers, but it didn't seem like he could use them in this state.

It left Crocodile with nothing to do besides ride the episode out. He might have been able to without incident, except now he was looking directly at Buggy's face, and tears were welling up in sea-blue eyes.

Fuck.

"Don't... don't leave." Buggy was looking at him now, but Crocodile could tell he was seeing someone else. His grip remained firm, and he tried to engage the chairman again. "Who Buggy? Who do you see?"

Instead of an answer, Buggy started sobbing. At least he wasn't fighting as hard to get away. So Crocodile watched, looking over the clown for...he wasn't sure what he was looking for. The golden hook traced one of Buggy's cheeks, catching a few tears. They just kept falling, and Crocodile sucked in a breath through his teeth. "Come on brat. What's wrong?"

Crocodile gradually released his grip, then slid off the clown when he didn't fight. Buggy didn't even sit up, but he did cover his eyes with his hands. He started mumbling, too, but the crying made him incoherent. Crocodile took the chance to feel his forehead, wincing. Mihawk hadn't mentioned crying, and this sight was a type of pathetic that Crocodile didn't enjoy. "You're really going to make me do this, aren't you?" Crocodile was getting an arm underneath the younger man and pulling him to the edge of the bed. Buggy surged up before he could get a good grip, nearly making Crocodile slam him back into the mattress.

Somehow, Buggy was warmer than him. The clown had latched into him, arms around his neck and face buried against a wide shoulder. Crocodile could feel the wetness of those tears almost instantly, but he had to ignore it. At least this position made it easier to pick the chairman up. "Captain," as Crocodile started to lift Buggy, he clung tighter, "you're not supposed to die."

That was the second time Buggy had called him Captain. The only Captain he could think of that

the clown had served under was--

Gol D. Roger, the late pirate king. So Buggy was seeing his lost captain--and father if he recalled what Mihawk had told him correctly. Tucking his damaged arm under Buggy, Crocodile supported his weight so he could card through blue hair with his hand. He wasn't sure if Buggy was hearing anything he said, but maybe he'd respond to touch? "Sorry, your old man died twenty years ago." And Crocodile remembered the day well. He'd never considered it, but Buggy would have been there, too. He carried the other to his washroom, thinking back on the execution. Crocodile had been young; he hadn't started his journey into the Grand Line, none of them had. Which meant the troublemaker in his arms hadn't just been young. He'd been a *child*.

A child raised on a pirate ship from birth or close to it. It had never dawned on him what that meant. He'd visited numerous islands with countless orphans, parents lost to the world's cruelties or abandoned for lack of resources to care for them. They usually had to grow up fast, or they died. But being on a pirate ship was an entirely different environment. Hardship and danger weren't avoidable; pirates sought out adventure, and those always came with a high chance of death for *seasoned* pirates. Maybe Buggy wasn't powerful, but with a new perspective, his being alive spoke of some ungodly will to live.

Sitting at the edge of the bath, Crocodile watched it slowly fill as he kept a tight hold on Buggy. He wasn't calming down, but he was talking again. Talking to Roger. Crocodile was trying not to listen, but morbid curiosity was getting the better of him. There were apologies, pleas, demands, and something about a disease. Had Roger been sick?

Crocodile didn't fill the bath too much, keenly aware that too much could weaken them both. He didn't need Buggy getting worked up again and accidentally drowning himself. "Let go." He pried hands from around his neck and set the clown in the tub. He didn't bother trying to undress Buggy, not with how warm he still was. He was ready for a fight, holding a hand against the chairman's chest, though no struggle came. Instead, Buggy gasped and grabbed Crocodile's arm. Something more concerning was happening.

Steam. Straight off Buggy's body, wherever he was wet, steam started to billow. Alarmed, Crocodile threw the cold tap open again, dragging the clown over to get his head underneath the flow. Mihawk hadn't said anything about this! "What the hell is wrong with your body? Wake up, Buggy!" He didn't hold Buggy's head under the water long, but there was a visible reason to cool him down much faster. When Crocodile yanked the clown out from under the stream, he started coughing, and his eyes were open and alert. He was awake!

Buggy sat up on his own, the steam dissipating. "What the hell? Where--" Crocodile let Buggy absorb his surroundings, watching the progression of confusion, fear, and then anger when the ex-warlord was finally noticed. "Crocodile?! What's going on??"

"That's what *I* want to know brat!"

The water level was still rising, and Buggy flinched and choked. The clown hadn't realized where he was but registered the water now. It was high enough that it was sapping the clown's strength, each breath getting shallower as he started going limp. Crocodile shut the water tap, holding the soaking chairman by the back of his shirt to keep him from tipping over. "You're not drowning. Just take deep breaths. I'll get you out in a second."

"W-why am I in here?" Buggy croaked, trying and failing to grip the tub's rim to steady himself. "Why does everything hurt?"

"Patience." Flat of his hook resting against Buggy's back to support him, Crocodile huffed as he pushed long hair aside to check the other's face. "I'm not taking you out until your fever is under control." Or if it looked like the clown was going to pass out. Crocodile wasn't about to let Buggy go back to sleep after he'd been unconscious for so long.

It was another twenty minutes of scuffling and arguing before Crocodile finally settled back on his bed. Buggy had been more than a little reluctant to cooperate once he'd been taken out of the water, not wanting to be carried or helped with drying off and changing. By the time he'd been brought back to the bed and tossed into the sheets, Crocodile was dripping wet and pissed off. He'd warned the clown not to move, then left him alone to clean up.

He was too tired to care about the way Buggy inched away from him after he'd laid down. "Um... Crocodile?" The voice was nervous but determined. "Isn't this your tent?"

"Yes. You've been unconscious for three days, and watching you here was easier."

"Three...?" From the corner of his eye, Crocodile could see Buggy staring at his own hands, curling three fingers one at a time as he seemed to digest the information. "What happened?"

"You got sick, apparently." Crocodile didn't go into detail, especially since they didn't know the exact cause of Buggy's fever. "Do you remember anything?"

"Um..." Buggy seemed to struggle with the question, and Crocodile watched him fidget with that brightly colored hair. Wet hair, he noticed. Releasing a heavy sigh, Crocodile pushed himself to sit up, leaning back against his headboard. "C'mere." He pats his thigh. Buggy, predictably, misinterpreted the meaning and turned a deep shade of red. At least it wasn't from the fever. "It's too late to be bashful. You've been cuddling up with Mihawk for three days and dragged me in twice."

He heard Buggy groan, probably wanting to launch into dramatics, but the energy for yelling and denying wasn't there. So the clown relented, crawling back over and sitting *next* to Crocodile. "Almost." The ex-warlord chided, wrapping an arm around the brat and dragging him the rest of the way into his lap. Buggy fit easily, and Crocodile set his hook over a shoulder to hold him still. "I'm drying your hair. These sheets are still fresh from this afternoon, and I'd like to keep them that way a little longer."

Despite the reassurance, Buggy still fidgeted uncomfortably until Crocodile took his hook away. Unseen, the golden prosthetic was actually removed and set aside on the bedside. He didn't need it snagging in the clown's hair while drying it, seeing as it was still a mess. He braced his scarred arm against Buggy's back, making him sit straighter as he gathered up the ends of the long locks. Drying took little time despite the brat's ridiculous amount of hair.

Crocodile always felt at ease doing this, and part of him wondered if the simple gesture would help ease Buggy's apparent anxiety. Sands swirled along the blue strands, taking excess moisture with them as he gently combed with his fingers to coax out the worst knots. Mihawk had pointed out early on that they needed to keep Buggy's hair tamed lest it get matted and unmanageable. "So, think of anything yet?" Crocodile prompted.

"Huh?!" Buggy jolted and started to look back but seemed to think better of it and stared straight ahead. "Have I—right, remembering." The question from before had gone unanswered. "I don't know. I think I remember when you came to my tent? But it doesn't feel like it was real. Like it was part of a dream."

Crocodile hummed, noting the other's reluctance to speak. Perhaps Buggy remembered his nightmares or even the hallucinations he'd been subjected to when his fever spiked. "You were doing a lot of dreaming. Talking, too." Crocodile used his scarred stump to lift Buggy's hair at the nape of his neck, ensuring he was drying it all the way through.

"T-t-talking?" Buggy swallowed audibly. "Listen, Croco-baby, if I said anything *untoward*, you can't r-really hold it against me. I wasn't conscious!"

A large hand settled on Buggy's head, and the clown squeaked before his scalp was gently massaged. Crocodile heard a quiet gasp, and then the chairman visibly relaxed as fingertips were pulled back and down the length of blue hair. There weren't many tangles left, and the last of Crocodile's sand retreated, leaving strands warm and dry.

He let Buggy squirm in silence, curious and amused by how the younger man had tried to defend himself. Crocodile picked up a stiff-bristle brush from his bedside, chuckling. "Interesting. Hawk Eyes and I thought you were terrified of us." He goaded. Once again, he started at the ends of Buggy's hair, gradually working out any remaining snags. "We never would've guessed you were leering at us behind our backs."

"No!" Buggy detached at his waist and whipped around. His hair slipped free from Crocodile's weak grasp. "That's not what I meant. I mean-- I don't, I was just saying that...that..." The clown trailed off, eyes trained down. Crocodile raised a brow, the brush in his hand still raised. "You're," he saw Buggy eyeing the brush, then the stump that his hook usually hid. "You're brushing my hair?" The whisper was one of disbelief, but there was something else that Crocodile couldn't quite read.

He motioned for the fool to turn back around. "Like I said before, it's too late to be shy. Hawk Eyes got too distracted trying to do this, so it has to be me. Now turn."

To Crocodile's surprise, the clown obeyed without a fuss. That was new, but he didn't comment and resumed his task. There was still some tension in Buggy's shoulders, though the cause was a mystery. Crocodile frowned, ignoring the slight ache in his chest as he smothered the urge to ask what was wrong.

He probably should have expected Buggy to speak up instead. "Crocodile? Am I...am I dying?"

Crocodile froze. Of all the things the clown could have said, that was not what he expected. "What? No, you fool." He set the brush aside and reached around to check Buggy's temperature, concern suddenly seeping back in. Was the fever coming back? Was there a new pain?

Before he could check anything, the clown had turned on him again, and Crocodile found himself face to face with tears and panic. "Don't lie! You and Hawk Eyes were acting strange before all this, and now you're being so nice. There has to be something wrong! So tell me!!"

Crocodile might have been able to feel offended if he couldn't see how sincere Buggy was being. It wasn't like the two ex-warlords had started this little partnership off on the best of terms with the clown, but he'd thought maybe, just *maybe*, they'd made it up to him. Even if they still tormented the brat, they'd stopped most of the physical beatings early on and cut verbal threats to a minimum. Crocodile had seen Mihawk even getting affectionate, albeit the swordsman's advances were not typical.

Buggy was still staring, searching, and Crocodile accidentally let his inner turmoil reach his face. Buggy saw it. "Wait. Wait wait wait! If I'm not dying, then why...?"

"You will be if you don't let me finish." It was an empty threat. Crocodile heard the weakness in his own voice. He covered his face and looked away, actually trying to hide from Buggy's investigation. The clown was far too close and was either ignorant of or ignoring Crocodile's discomfort.

Then he moved away, turning back and sitting between Crocodile's legs again. No complaints, no comments, no questions. Buggy pushed his hair back over his shoulders as if to invite Crocodile to continue. And continue he did, as if he'd never stopped. Crocodile refused to acknowledge whatever had just happened. He saw a new redness tingeing the chairman's ears and had to close his eyes.

Tomorrow. It would all be a problem for *tomorrow*.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Mihawk leaves to chase enticing prey, but his timing couldn't be worse.

Chapter Notes

I accidentally made this much longer than intended, so I'm splitting it into two chapters. I'll try to get the other part edited and posted sometime over the weekend, but no promises.

Thanks for sticking around, though, and I hope you enjoy it!

Mihawk arrived early at Crocodile's tent the following day, seeming eager and anxious to hear from his partner. Somehow, he knew Buggy had woken up, though now the chairman was again sound asleep. The clown was still hot to the touch, but his fever may have finally started to drop. Crocodile was not being allowed to get out of bed, Mihawk bringing him coffee and his cigars to keep the taller man content and compliant. All because Buggy was curled into Crocodile's side, likely chasing the comfortable warmth the sand man radiated.

Crocodile had managed to sit up without disturbing the clown, and Mihawk's excitement wasn't lost on him. "I know you've been waiting for this for a while." The scarred stump was waved over Buggy's half-hidden form tucked against him. He let his fondness show so long as the clown was asleep. "But it needs to wait. At least until he's healthy." He held up a cigar, and Mihawk obliged in lighting it.

"Something happened last night before his fever broke. He was seeing things again. Steam was coming off him when I tried to cool him down." The steam part had been more alarming than the hallucinations. "I don't think he's just sick. I think something's happening to his body." Whatever was happening, Crocodile didn't have a clue. "The only thing I can think of is conqueror's haki. If this is going to happen whenever he uses it, I'd argue he's better off not learning any haki."

The argument was selfish, and Crocodile knew it. Learning to use haki was essential for surviving in the New World, and the fact that Buggy couldn't use an *ounce* of it made him more than weak. Considering the clown's reputation, it made him an easy target.

"He'll learn. If some part of him doesn't know it already." Mihawk said. It wasn't an argument; there was no rebuttal or further reasoning. It was simply Mihawk reiterating his intentions, confirming he would carry them out with or without Crocodile's approval. "I don't think this is caused by his late awakening, though. It might have exasperated a previous condition, but it wouldn't be a source."

Mihawk was their expert on haki, so it was hard to dispute his claims. Crocodile didn't have the patience to try, either. Smoke billowed from between his lips as he closed his eyes, thinking back

on what he'd seen and heard the night before. "Do you think you can handle telling me about what happened that first night?" Crocodile looked down at the sleeping clown, and Mihawk sighed.

"It was violent. There was a great battle in a storm while he fought and begged his family to live. He saw and heard so much death that day." Mihawk moved from his chair to sit on the edge of the bed, leaning over Crocodile to brush some of Buggy's hair from his face. "I hadn't thought about it before, but he was a child on the Oro Jackson. A child in the middle of countless battles, in wars with the most powerful men of their time. He fought with them and killed with them. And he lived."

Crocodile stayed quiet, knowing Mihawk's realization was the same he'd had the night before. They'd known Buggy's pedigree, who he'd sailed under, but they'd never seen the whole picture. There was untapped potential in their chairman, and Crocodile suspected the conqueror's haki was just the start. With those possibilities came a tragedy that had been hidden in the shadows of the greatness of the Roger Pirates in their prime.

"Was there more?" As heartless as it was to press for more from an obviously sensitive topic, Crocodile needed to know what Mihawk had heard.

Mihawk didn't answer immediately, likely gathering his thoughts of the hectic evening. "There was...a lot more anger than fear. He loved Roger and those men, but his fury was unbridled. Usually, it was towards enemies, but he did turn it on someone close once." Mihawk paused, frowning as he looked away. "He spoke to Shanks the most. The pain in his eyes was...heavy. He shed no tears, but the way he looked at me..."

"He was upset." Crocodile tried to complete Mihawk's thought and ground the swordsman with his voice.

"He was heartbroken. But it was dwarfed by his temper. His loyalty was spit on by someone he trusted with his entire self." Mihawk leaned over Crocodile again, eyes half-lidded as he reached to cup Buggy's cheek. The clown stirred, but ultimately, the touch did not wake him. "Shanks might have more to answer for than I ever realized." The tension surrounding Shanks was shaping up to be more brutal with context. Crocodile hated the looks Mihawk and Buggy would wear when the redhead came up, so it was only natural that he despised the man, too.

Explanation delivered, it was Mihawk's turn to prod at what Crocodile had seen and heard. It wasn't nearly as much as the swordsman had endured, but it had been miserable all the same. "Roger really was his father. More than he was the Pirate King." It added more weight to Buggy's ambitions and explained so much of his wild dreams and desires. Though the clown didn't realize it, he'd inherited a lot from his late father. Funny, considering it was always Shanks who Buggy claimed was Roger's spitting image. "Roger was sick for a long time before he was executed. The old bastard chose how to die instead of letting some illness take him." Still, it hadn't made the loss easier for the Roger pirates. Not for Buggy, at least.

Mihawk seemed to tense at the new information, eyeing Buggy before he nervously turned to Crocodile. "Do you think the illness could be the same...?" The same thing afflicting Buggy. Crocodile had considered it, but with what he'd gleaned from the clown's ramblings, he was confident the sickness wasn't the same. He assured Mihawk of it as well. "It isn't the same thing. Our witch doctor would have found it if it was." Madam Zara may be intimidating with her dangerous interests, but she was no amateur. Crocodile had been forced to recognize her skill every time she came to check on Buggy, and Daz even spoke highly of her seemingly boundless knowledge. He'd never realized she was such an irreplaceable asset.

Trading his cigar for a mug, Crocodile let himself relax. He'd gotten some sleep, and Buggy was showing signs of recovery. Judging by Mihawk's actions, his partner was also ready to take over watching the chairman, meaning he could get some *real* work done. "Before you start doting on the brat, would you move? You can wake him up after I'm gone and do whatever you want, but someone needs to be out there."

Instead of getting up, Mihawk set a hand on Crocodile's leg. "I can't."

Crocodile swallowed his mouthful of coffee, eyeing his partner over his mug. "What does that mean?"

From inside his cloak, Mihawk produced a folded page. The drink was set aside, the larger man picking up his cigar again as he felt a headache budding. "What's this?" The paper was taken and unfolded so he could examine the contents. It was a report from one of their border islands, and it was marked as an urgent request. There was a heavy increase of Marine ships in the area that were broaching into their waters. Worse, they were chasing a very distinct ship. "Blackbeard..."

"Our informants suspect they have devil fruit users captive on board. With that kind of cargo, there would no doubt be a high-ranking captain on that ship." One of the Ten Titanic Captains might be vulnerable. Alone. "I have to sail with whoever is dispatched to investigate." If there was a chance for Mihawk to fight one of Blackbeard's direct subordinates, Crocodile knew his partner couldn't resist the siren call. The swordsman itched for a good fight, and he didn't doubt the standards for who and what was worthy of Mihawk's time had been dropping the longer he was waiting. Wanting.

The page crumpled in Crocodile's grip. "Hawk Eyes." This wasn't the time, he wanted to say. Mihawk was their strongest fighter on the open seas, and though Crocodile was confident on land, it was reassuring when the swordsman had his back on Karai Bari. Not to mention, their figurehead, the *actual* ruler of their territory, was still bedbound. But Crocodile could not utter a single word against Mihawk leaving. He knew it was part of his partner's ambition, and the chances of finding a true challenge were few and far between.

"When are you leaving?"

"As soon as I'm done here," Mihawk replied quietly. "I may be able to go faster if I sail alone."

"Do it then." Crocodile urged, prodding his partner to move so he could get up. He had a sense of purpose now, mind abuzz with plans. Though he had wanted to avoid ending up the sole leader left on Karai Bari, Crocodile had mentally prepared for this possibility. At least he still had Daz to guard Buggy and report to him if anything happened. "I'll handle things here."

Crocodile was stopped by a hand grabbing his hook. He turned to meet Mihawk's eyes, ensuring there wasn't a hint of hesitance or doubt in his own. Whatever the swordsman saw, he was apparently satisfied. "I know you will." Mihawk's grip moved up his partner's arm, and Crocodile sighed before he leaned down. The faintest touch of a calloused thumb massaged the edge of the scar that cut across Crocodile's face. "Would you do me one favor while I'm gone?"

"Hm?" Crocodile had closed his eyes, basking in Mihawk's presence as the swordsman traced his jawline. The touch ended at his chin, and Crocodile's head was jerked down further, nearly tipping him off balance. "Wait to get any more comfortable with Buggy until I get back. I want to be here when you finally break and kiss him."

That earned a low growl and the start of a denial filled with venom, but Crocodile was silenced with a gentle kiss. It was brief, and the sand man jerked away the moment it was done. "Bastard!"

But Mihawk was already gone, the cloth partition falling back into place after it had been disturbed by the swordsman's quick departure. Crocodile didn't hold back as he shouted after Mihawk, cursing the man and his own rotten luck. On the bed, Buggy stirred, groaning as he turned over. He was rid of one fool and now stuck with another. Crocodile left the clown alone, pressing on to get dressed after stubbing his cigar in an ashtray. Maybe he was getting too old for this--or perhaps he'd just have to get even with Mihawk and Buggy for all the trouble they caused him.

When Buggy had woken up, he'd been woozy and had to be prodded and shaken to keep his eyes open. Crocodile kept him conscious long enough to get water and a light broth into him, then let him pass out again into a pile of freshly fluffed pillows and under soft blankets. Daz was instructed to keep an ear trained for suspicious noises upstairs while ensuring no one could get a single foot in at the entrance. Crocodile trusted his right-hand man to find him if anything happened.

The town was alive that day, warm and sunny after their long stint of storms. Crocodile was grateful for the clear skies and started at the docks. He wasn't good at rambunctious parties and cheerful, grandiose speeches, but the repertoire he'd built when speaking to smaller groups was healthy and productive. Where once he was feared, now Crocodile was respected, admired even. The workers were excited to see one of the Cross Guild leaders, but Crocodile noticed more fanfare than usual. Cargo was being unloaded, but as he spoke with the dockmaster, a few workers scrambled forward, bringing a hefty crate to present to Crocodile. He noted their care when handling it, smirking as they gently opened it to show him the contents. It was a fresh batch of Bananawani eggs, and the handler charged with their safekeeping had a detailed report of their harvesting. Crocodile was excited to see them, admiring the care taken in collecting and packing the eggs.

"Get these to Mohji right away. He has some nest boxes with the proper sand." Crocodile handed the reports back to the handler. "You stay with him and help get these buried. Keep the box outside while it's sunny so it warms up. Mohji will know the rest." The crew nodded, sealing the crate and hoisting it up to carry off. Once they were gone, a few others came forth with manifests, surprisingly prepared and professional with their reports. Crocodile pretended not to notice they were looking at him like children waiting for praise. "Good work. Keep it up." Everything was handed back, and he turned to leave as the workers whispered excitedly amongst themselves.

His next stop was the kitchen to check their supply orders. Crocodile spoke with each cook, checked the inventory counts, and added a few more items to orders before signing off on them. Somehow, they needed more meat. One of the men almost questioned the ex-warlord on his additions, but one look from Crocodile had him hold his tongue. They all knew of his love for bananawani, so they were always caught off guard when they saw the animal's meat listed for purchase.

"I'll be able to harvest it myself soon," Crocodile assured the kitchen staff. "Until then, keep it in stock. I intend to teach you all how to cook it when the next shipment arrives." He meant it, too. He'd already turned Mihawk onto the cuisine but was tired of cooking whenever they craved it. What was the point of being in charge if he couldn't make others do routine tasks in his stead?

With the staff addressed, Crocodile left them to their work and moved on to their barracks. They had plenty of temporary shelter, but they'd laid the foundation for more permanent structures to finally be built. They'd lured civilians to their island, and he'd be damned if they didn't keep them with promises of housing and contracts. They were valuable if they were willing to live on Karai Bari, the main base of Cross Guild. If Marines ever tried to invade, it would be harder for the bastards to wage all-out war. Crocodile knew there were a few bleeding hearts left that might sow dissent among the ranks. Not to mention, civilians offered unique talents and blind loyalty in

exchange for their protection. Alabasta had proven the importance of a civilian population to him, at least.

Crocodile was reviewing blueprints with one of the foremen when he was interrupted by Galdino and Daz. The wax man struggled to keep up, and Daz's appearance startled the ex-warlord. He tried not to look too panicked as he walked to meet the former number one, ignoring Galdino when the wax man nearly collapsed beside them. "What happened?"

"It's not the chairman," Daz whispered. "A report came in from the patrols. There's a ship approaching Karai Bari, and they're not stopping."

"Who? Marines?" Crocodile had already stepped around the pair, heading for the docks. Daz and Galdino stayed at his heels, and the former Mr. Three answered. "No, sir. It's m-much worse!" The other man was still panting after his run, so Daz quickly supplied the critical details.

"It's another emperor, sir." Daz's voice was low and solemn. "The ship is the Red Force. It's the Red Hair Pirates, without a doubt."

The Red Hair Pirates meant Shanks. Crocodile's first instinct was to order Daz back to his tent, but without Mihawk on Karai Bari, he needed another powerhouse at his back. Galdino made for a good shield, and *maybe* Alvida could be convinced to make an effort. Even then, they'd have difficulty fending off the Red Force and her whole crew, no matter how much fodder they had behind them.

Despite their weakness, Cross Guild's entire force lining the shores ready to fight was quite a sight to behold. Crocodile ordered them to stay off the beach and closer to town. It left him access to a plethora of sand, their best defense if the enemy pirates stormed their shores.

Instead of sending their whole crew, the Red Force moored outside their natural harbor. Crocodile cursed under his breath when he noticed they'd stopped and were sending a dinghy with a handful of men. "Is Shanks in that boat?" Daz was at Crocodile's side, watching the approaching Red Hair Pirates with a borrowed spyglass. "I don't see him, sir. They lowered a few barrels and a chest, but the only man I recognize is the first mate."

Benn Beckman. The man was easier to deal with than Shanks but equally dangerous. The fact that the captain himself wasn't approaching was both vexing and suspicious. "Daz. Tell half the men to move back into town. I want them to stay on alert and be on the lookout for anything out of place. They're to report anyone they don't recognize, and you will confirm their identity."

"You think this is a distraction?"

"I don't know." Crocodile admit. "But I'm trusting my gut. Our natural defenses can't hold back someone of Shanks's strength. I don't want him at my back if my hunch is right." Daz nodded and turned to leave before Crocodile snapped to get his attention back. "Wait! Get Alvida and Mr. Three in front of my tent. Make *sure* they understand that no one is allowed inside."

Daz bowed at the waist. "Yes sir." And then he was gone, leaving Crocodile alone to face the approaching envoy. Reaching into his coat, the sand man brushed his fingers over the long silver whistle he carried but opted to take out a new cigar and his lighter instead. He didn't know what the Red Hair Pirates wanted, so waiting to reveal his trump card was wise.

So he waited, lighting his cigar and watching the dinghy glide effortlessly over the calm waters of their harbor. Crocodile allowed them to pull up to the dock and tie up, but he moved to stand in the way of anyone actually getting out. Thankfully, Shanks's first mate could read the mood and

motioned for his men to stay seated. "Quite the welcoming committee." Benn mused as he stood to observe the shores. The gathered Cross Guild's numbers had decreased, but it was still an impressive line of armed pirates ready to fight. "Thanks for coming to meet us, Sir Crocodile. Don't take this the wrong way, but we were expecting your leader too. Will Buggy be joining us?"

Crocodile's eyes narrowed, and he resisted the urge to sneer. "No. You're dealing with me." He blew out a thick cloud of smoke, not bothering to turn away from Beckman. "Especially since *your* captain isn't present."

Benn sighed, smiling in understanding. "You're not wrong. I convinced him to wait and let me handle diplomacy. We know what it looks like when an Emperor approaches a rival's home base without notice, so I'm here to clear everything up." The barrels and chest were motioned to, with the other pirates shifting as much as they could to get out of Crocodile's line of sight to them. "Our boss wanted to visit his old friend and congratulate him on his success. Despite our best efforts to dissuade him, he sent some of our best treasures and booze as a peace offering. He mentioned something about maps, too, but he insisted that was for Buggy alone."

Of course Shanks would send something their dear chairman would leap at without thought. The treasure could attract such a response too, but maps were Buggy's weakness. "We don't want them," Crocodile said. "In case it wasn't obvious, none of you are welcome here. Especially not that captain of yours."

The denial was swift and blunt, and Crocodile guessed it wasn't expected based on the looks the Red Hair Pirates exchanged. Benn held himself tall and unphased, but he did cross his arms. "You sure? You don't want to consult your boss at all?"

It was such a weak attempt at bruising Crocodile's ego, trying to call him a subordinate. His pride wasn't so delicate, and the ex-warlord was on edge. The odds of Red Force showing up right after Mihawk was gone, and while Buggy was sick, it felt too convenient. There was no way Shanks had brought his ship to Karai Bari with such a benevolent motive. "Getting hard of hearing Beckman?" The casual goading wasn't going to be entertained. "This is your only warning. Keep your trinkets. Row back to your ship and get out of our territory. Now." Crocodile let malice drip from the last word, satisfied when even Benn seemed caught off guard. He took in their looks and tensed when no one showed any signs of *urgency* to follow the command. They were stalling. Crocodile growled as he turned to walk back down the dock towards land as he scanned for someone competent. Cabaji actually came forward to meet him, looking odd without his unicycle. "What's going on, Sir Crocodile?"

"I have a bad feeling." He didn't know what was happening, but the ex-warlord was not about to admit he had no information. The cigar was plucked from his lips, and Crocodile licked the end of his hook to wet it. Cabaji tried to ask what he was doing, but his jaw snapped shut as Crocodile stabbed the tip through the back of his own hand. "Stay here and make sure they go back to their ship. They've already been warned, so if anyone else approaches, give no quarter." Crocodile swung his hand back to send his own blood into the water.

Leaving Cabaji at the docks, Crocodile pushed through the crowd, ordering them to stay put and listen to the final high command being left behind. The shed blood dissipated in the water, and there was a low rumble from deep within the harbor.

In front of his tent, Alvida and Galdino were standing guard. Seeing them didn't ease the pit of anxiety in Crocodile's chest, and he ordered them to stay outside while he rushed in. Nothing looked disturbed, but it felt unnaturally quiet. The moment he was out of sight, Crocodile *ran*, and he didn't stop until he could see his bed. The view made his stomach drop--it was empty. Buggy

was gone.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Shanks, what have you done?

Chapter Notes

This chapter goes into more detail about Buggy's past trauma, just as a warning! It's also more emotionally charged, with tears and yelling and all that.

Buggy wasn't sure what had happened. The last time he woke up, he remembered the cool colors of Crocodile's tent and a plush bed that smelled of tobacco and cedarwood. Now, he could feel the very distinct rocking of a ship, and he could practically taste the sea's salt and almost gagged on the smell of cheap booze. What the hell was going on?

"Hey, glad you're awake."

Buggy sat up, alert—only to get dizzy and grab his head to keep it from falling off his neck. Something moved to his left, and his vision filled with red. "Urg...Red Hair?"

He blinked slowly to control the vertigo spell; sure enough, it was Shanks. His old friend's eyes were worried, but his expression brightened when Buggy recognized him. "That's right! It's good to know you remember my face still, Buggs." Shanks had a chair by the bed and sat back in it. "I've missed you ."

"I wish every day to forget all of you. But for some reason, you keep showing up in my life." Buggy couldn't stop the biting insults, his mind scrambling as he tried to ascertain what had happened. He slowly looked around, recognizing the room as a captain's cabin. So he was definitely on a ship. "Where am I?"

"This is the Red Force, my ship."

Red Force?

But he'd just been in Crocodile's tent on Karai Bari island, in the middle of his own goddamn town! Shanks was supposed to be on the other side of the Grand Line, partying it up with cheap whores and endless liquor. For all Buggy knew, that could be precisely where the ship was. Far from his base, and more importantly, his loyal army! He didn't need to know just yet how he'd come to be here, on Shanks's ship, in the scoundrel's bed. What he needed to know was, "Why?"

Shanks held his smile, that infuriatingly gentle look, then chuckled. "Well, to congratulate you!" He rubbed the back of his head as if this was some innocent plan gone wrong. "Your business partners weren't very keen on letting you take visitors. It could be because we're both emperors now, but we were friends before that!"

It all still didn't feel real. Buggy looked at the bed he was lying on—he tried not to look too hard, at least not at the sheets. The clown confirmed he was whole and still dressed in the light clothes he'd fallen asleep in. Buggy cursed himself for not strapping any weapons under them, but it wasn't like he'd been in the right state of mind to even *consider* there would be danger. He slid to the edge of the bed to set his feet on the floor. "You're not supposed to kidnap your friends." Buggy got up, brushing past Shanks to look around. Shanks showed no signs of stopping him, that well-meaning look still plain as day, so Buggy decided to snoop around the cabin.

"What the hell do you actually want, Red Hair?"

The clown could practically feel Shanks sigh, the rise and fall of broad shoulders, but it didn't feel like that grin had left his lips. "Alright, you got me."

"Yeah, you've never been smart enough to hide things from me." Shanks was not *bad* at concealing his true intent, but Buggy was notoriously *good* at reading the man's very soul when he tried. Buggy ran his finger along the spines of books, looking for anything he hadn't read before. Half his intent was to browse and maybe 'borrow' a book or two, but the other half was to hide his anxiety at not knowing what he'd woken up to. "Out with it."

There was shuffling, the creak of Shanks's chair as he stood up, and Buggy held his breath as he tried to track the other by sound alone. The redhead didn't get closer. Instead, he seemed to get further away. Buggy chanced a glance over his shoulder, noticing Shanks was facing away. The man was standing at a desk far too ornate, rummaging through a top drawer. The clown huffed, stalking over as he got impatient. "Well? Don't ignore me. I know you heard me."

No response. A worn journal was pulled from the drawer and offered to Buggy. "Sorry, it's easier to show you. Look in the front."

Buggy stepped back once he had the journal, side-eyeing Shanks before carefully opening the front cover. He didn't trust the man, but his breath caught when he saw a worn, torn sheet of paper tucked between the front cover and the first page. A *vivre* card. Not just any *vivre* card, either. Buggy recognized his own handwriting against the burnt edge, half his name currently erased. "You...you kept this?" Of course, Shanks had kept it. All of the Roger pirates had *vivre* cards made on their first trip, and they'd each held a piece. Buggy wouldn't admit it, but Shanks's piece was hidden away in much the same way, pressed between the pages of an old log book.

But something was wrong. Why so much of the card was burned away didn't make sense—he wasn't dying! Crocodile had said he was sick but that he would be fine. As if to reassure him, some of the paper reformed before him, a fraction of his name returning. Buggy breathed out, then started to turn to shout at the dim-witted oaf he used to call 'friend'. It didn't take a genius to tell what had happened. Shanks had seen the *vivre* card burning and followed it straight to Buggy as his hero complex demanded. It was insulting, it was humiliating—!

Shanks was right behind him! Buggy almost bit his tongue to silence himself, retreating with a few hurried steps back to put a comfortable distance between them. But Red Hair couldn't take a hint, and a few confident strides had them face to face again. The clown was already backed into a wall, meeting Shanks's eyes as the journal fell from his lax grip. "Come with me, Buggy."

The muffled sound of Shanks's crew outside the cabin and the rhythmic back-and-forth tilt of the ship all bled away. Buggy felt the wetness of rain, heard the roar of thunder, and could smell fresh blood. He was not looking at Shanks but at the execution tower of Lougetown. His father's

beheaded body had been left as a macabre display, like a final *trophy* for the Marines to gloat over. They'd heard the screams and excitement from the crowd and watched countless pirates race off to the harbor to chase after this new legend Gol D. Roger had spread in his final moments--but still, they tried to maintain that this was *their* victory.

Buggy couldn't hear Shanks of the present, trapped instead in his memory. His breathing was shallow as he fought back the suicidal urge to storm that tower, to kill every last Marine he could see and likely die trying to give Roger's body its proper respect. He was not crying. It was raining.

Just behind him was his best friend, his brother, his *it's complicated* partner--Shanks, wearing Captain's beloved straw hat, shining so brightly even in this storm. Red Hair was looking at his feet, eyes shadowed, and Buggy's heart ached. For Roger, for Shanks, and himself. Captain had chosen Shanks, and now Captain was dead.

Steadying his voice, Buggy willed his body to move, take up space, and *prove* that he still existed and could have a purpose beyond this. He spoke to Shanks, who looked so much like a stranger without his wide grin and overflowing with passion. All that potential and Buggy knew he couldn't let this man fall, that he had to offer his hand and pull him forward. Maybe Roger hadn't picked him, but they had always been *together* by their father's will, and Buggy was happy to stay that way. They'd promised each other.

"I changed my mind." Four words shattered him, and suddenly, Buggy really was looking at a stranger. Shanks's voice was hollow, not broken, but detached. It incited a lot of things in the clown, but the thing that won out was his *temper*. Shanks claimed he'd still be a pirate--why? Why, if he had no ambition?! Buggy wanted to scream, to fight, but Red Hair didn't stop!

"Come with me, Buggy!" It wasn't a question. It was practically a command. Shanks was holding his hand out now, but it promised nothing, *gave* nothing. This stranger, wet and pathetic, was not asking for help. Shanks was asking Buggy to *drown* for him.

"I'm not going to work under you, idiot!" Finally, his rage found his voice, hiding the mess of emotions, and his excessive movements hid shaking fists and the quiver of his lips. Their father's blood was still fresh, falling from the tower, and here was Shanks spitting on his will anyway. "You coward!!" Buggy shoved the boy away, lightening cracking above them--

Buggy was panting, hands fisted in the front of Shanks's white shirt as he loomed over the man. The redhead was on his back, eyes wide, afraid and concerned. The clown didn't remember what had happened, but he was sitting on top of Shanks, his body hot with fever and fury. Wetness fell onto Shanks's face, and that expression twisted further into panic and *pity*.

"How dare you." Buggy hissed. "How dare you say that to me!"

"Buggy, it's not what you think--"

"Isn't it?!" Many called him weak, but the clown had enough strength to jerk Shanks up by his collar and then slam his head back down to shut him up. "You didn't come here thinking you would find the same sniveling little brat you left behind in Lougetown two decades ago?" Buggy had left first, but he wouldn't let semantics stop him. "You didn't drag your entire crew across the Grand Line when you saw the faintest burn on that *vivre* card, storm *my* island, and steal me away while I was unconscious? And you *didn't* just ask me to abandon everything I've accomplished, everything I've fought and bled and nearly *died for*, so that you could be the hero again?!"

For once, Shanks's expression was not schooled or soft or tender. It was raw, hurt, and maybe angry. *Good.* "Twenty-four years, Shanks! Captain and I gave you everything twenty-four years ago, but you threw it away. You think time stopped for me just because you weren't ready?" Buggy's vision was starting to blur, but he just kept screaming. "Everything has changed. I didn't wait for you! I became a captain, a warlord, and now an Emperor. Just like you! I have allies with real desires and partners who chase their passion no matter the cost. And they chose **me**, they're supporting **my** dream! And unlike you, I'm not about to betray their loyalty because I'm afraid to fail!"

Fail was all Buggy had done his entire life. He'd lose, fall, cry, and then get back up and try again. He chased his desires at his own pace, with his unique skills, dumb luck be damned. The weak little spark overshadowed by the beacons of the Roger Pirates, by Shanks, was not so little anymore. Buggy refused to go back into the dark.

Shanks's hand grabbed Buggy's shoulder and shoved him over, switching their positions. The clown struggled, trying to kick as he shrieked, but Shanks was stronger and pinned him with embarrassing ease. Buggy still whined, and his efforts to escape didn't stop, even if they were useless. "Buggy, please! I'm not doing this to disrespect you or belittle you. I know I messed up. I'm so sorry." As sorry as he was, the redhead still caught Buggy's wrists and held them prone. He stayed like that, letting Buggy thrash and insult him, cheeks still wet with fresh tears.

"Buggy, you're overheating." Shanks leaned down, pressing his forehead to Buggy's, and the touch seemed to calm the clown down. Buggy was left panting, but he was watching the redhead now, waiting. "Please, everything you've done... I'm so proud of you."

Buggy swallowed thickly, "Sh-shut up Red Hair."

"It's true, please, baby--."

"Shut up! I don't need an unambitious b-boor like you pointing out the obvious!" The slip of the pet name did not help Buggy's temper either, his eyes flashing, teeth bared. But Shanks pressed on. "Listen. You've done so much all alone. I know you. You're feverish and thin, your *vivre* card was fading. I know Crocodile and Mihawk. I know how they *are*. I can help you--."

Buggy surged up, slamming his forehead into Shanks's with a harsh crack. "I knew it! I knew you were trying to play a hero!"

Shanks's temper had started to show, so he released his grip on Buggy to keep from hurting him. It opened the way for the clown to punch the redhead and throw him off. "There's nothing wrong with needing help, Buggy! Let me help you, please!"

The pair was screaming over each other, Buggy somehow maintaining his volume even as the room spun. The commotion outside was suddenly getting louder, and the double doors into Shanks's cabin swung open violently. "Boss, there's trou--!" The Red Hair Pirate froze in the entryway when he was fixed with the deadly look from his captain. Buggy couldn't hear either man, focused on the door and the freedom beyond. He wasn't about to wait for an invitation either.

Buggy rushed the unfortunate lackey that had interrupted, throwing a fist from his wrist to fly ahead and slam into the intruder's chest. The blow hit hard, taking the man off his feet and sending him flying back, thanks to the extra strength granted by the clown's devil fruit. The way Shanks was talking, they were close to Karai Bari. If he could just get off the Red Force, even if he had to dive into the sea, he needed to *escape*!

As he rushed out onto the deck, bare feet slid on the smooth wood, the wind whipping up long blue hair in a frenzy since it was free from any ties. Buggy had to skid to a stop before he reached the mainmast, quickly surrounded by confused and angry Red Hair Pirates. Hand returning to his wrist, they recognized Buggy as the one who'd attacked their friend, and blades were being drawn. The clown's breath caught, eyes darting frantically, but there was nowhere to run. Even if swords and knives couldn't hurt him, he was still cornered, and none of these low-level rookies seemed to recognize who he was.

There was a loud crash, wood crunching, and the entire ship jerked to the side, sending her crew and captives onto the deck and slamming into railings. Some even went overboard, and weapons were dropped and scattered across the ground. Buggy was not fortunate enough to stay on his feet, nearly sent over into the water with the rest. He caught himself, feeling the salt water spray hit his face as he breathed deeply, closing his eyes.

Suddenly, he wasn't on the Red Force anymore.

Wet blue strands stuck to his face, sea blue eyes wide and scared as thunder shook him to his core. He couldn't get hypnotized by the water; all the sea promised was a slow death, but another grim fate rapidly approached him from behind. Buggy turned and split his body at his waist, watching as a burly pirate missed his wide swing and toppled over the ship's side. His pieces rejoined, but he barely had time to catch his breath. The rain started to pelt the deck, the harsh wind fighting to drown out the violent roar of the war on the Oro Jackson. He threw himself down, sliding under feet, between legs, and grabbing the hilt of a dagger. He slashed the leg of the closest enemy, trying not to gag when blood splattered across his face.

"Buggy!" Even over the storm, Buggy could hear his brother's voice. He shoved himself to his feet, throwing his hair out of his face as he searched for the bright red hair. He wished he hadn't lost his beanie! "Shanks?" The other boy was nowhere to be found, but his voice sounded close, desperate.

There was no time to search. Shanks would be fine. He was strong and brave--and Buggy had to sidestep another enemy, twisting around and swinging up a leg with the momentum to slam it against the back of the attacker's head. Why were they diving at him? Could Shiki's men tell he was the weakest? Were they trying to catch him, would they use him as a shield against Captain?! At least he got another knife, one for each hand now.

A place like this wasn't appropriate for children--but Roger hadn't listened to him, none of them had, and now he was running back across the Oro Jackson to rejoin the fray. Another sword swept down into his path, right across his belly, and again, Buggy's body automatically chopped to avoid the blade. For the man's trouble, one of the daggers was buried into the side of his neck, left there when Buggy caught a fist to his chest that knocked him away.

Buggy was caught against another body, coughing as his parts came back together. The arm around him was sturdy and warm, and a familiar voice washed over him and settled his nerves. "I've got ya son." Captain, with Ace held out protectively to block further attacks while Buggy caught his breath. "Take deep breaths." Roger kneeled, large hand against Buggy's chest to keep him steady until he could support his own weight. No one seemed to dare approach Captain, not so long as he wore such a manic grin, his eyes wild and daring as he held one of his cabin boys close to his chest. Roger smoothed back wet blue hair from Buggy's face as the boy's breathing and heart rate slowed. "I need ya to find Shanks and stay close to him. Can ya do that fer me lad?"

Shanks. He'd heard Shanks's voice somewhere but couldn't find him before. The Oro Jackson was

chaos, pitching hard with the strong winds and brutal waves. But Buggy could never deny his Captain's commands, no matter how afraid he was. "Y-Yes, Captain!" Though his voice quivered, the boy steeled himself, pushed free from Roger's grasp, and rejoined the fight. He needed to dodge and weave through, ignoring the death howls and bodies beginning to litter the deck.

He didn't make it far, the boat tipping again, nearly capsizing this time in the rough seas.

Buggy caught himself on wood siding again, but the Red Force was under his feet this time. Blood was on his hands, and he was drenched in sweat and seawater, but he barely had a moment to collect himself. Safety. His mind screamed for safety as he split his body into small parts, levitating to the nearby rigging to grip rat lines and *climb*.

"Stay back!" That was Shanks's voice, frantic and terrified. Every fiber of the clown's body felt like it was on fire, steam billowing off his skin as he reformed. He'd nearly reached the apex of the rigging when he released one hand, letting his body swing out so he could sweep his eyes across the horizon. The ship was moving, not just because of waves, but because it was sailing. Yet Buggy could still see his island, so close he could make out the bodies of his followers spread along the beach.

"Buggy, wait!" Shanks shouted. Benn had his hands on the redhead, holding him. The Red Hair Pirate's captain could not release his full strength to break free. He'd already knocked out some of his crew with his conquerer's haki when mayhem had erupted on deck, and blood was spilled. Most had seen how the clown was moving, noticed his vacant, wide eyes after Shanks's first warning, and were wise to stay back. A handful of men had still disobeyed, either because they hadn't heard or out of anger, and they paid the price at Buggy's hands. Shanks had seen Buggy kill before, but what he saw now on his ship was practiced, precise, and dangerous. One of his crew was surely dead, others wounded and bleeding on the ground. Releasing his haki prevented further casualties, possibly saving them from all-out war.

"Why should I?" The clown screamed back. Shanks could hear a tinge of gleeful madness, and he didn't doubt there was a wide grin on Buggy's face. The redhead watched as the other released his grip on the rat ropes, separating into segments as he dropped, feet landing perfectly on the wooden rails and his body coming together on top of them. "You're kidnapping me, you bastard--Me! I'm an Emperor, same as you, and you think you can humiliate me like this?!"

Benn's grip loosened before he stepped back from his captain, letting the pair speak while he rushed to help with the wounded. "I know," Shanks said softly, "I'd hoped you would talk to me, but this was the only other way if you wouldn't listen. I'm sorry--"

"No, you're not!" Buggy screeched. "If you were, you'd turn this ship around and take me back!"

"I am sorry!" Shanks took a step closer, matching the clown's volume. "And we can't turn around! Something's in the water, and it's already damaged our hull. We have to move the ship." They had to *leave*. "I know you don't accept it right now." Shanks held out a hand towards his friend Buggy. "But I'm a pirate too, Buggy. I'm selfish and greedy, just like you." His lips lifted into the practiced, carefree smile. A glimmer of hope was being shrouded by grief. "I'm not going to leave you behind again."

An unnatural silence settled over the ship, and Shanks's declaration seemed to echo. Then, a strange pressure gripped the crew, making even the redhead stiffen and twist around, hand gripping Gryphon's hilt. Something was surrounding him, his crew, and his *ship*, but it wasn't something he could quite challenge with his haki. It was foreign, and as it settled over, then *into* him, Shanks felt

weightless. Benn was back at his side in the blink of an eye, grabbing his captain by his shoulder to turn him back around. "I thought you said his power didn't work if his feet weren't on the ground." His first mate hissed.

Shanks followed as Benn pointed up, tilting his head until he found Buggy no longer on the ship but floating high over the water beside them. As Benn said, the other was whole, feet still attached, as if he were standing on the air itself. His arms were held before him, fingers splayed, and hands shaking. The Red Force had stopped moving. "You refuse to listen to me. You refuse to accept the truth right in front of you." Buggy's fingers started to curl, and the ship groaned beneath them. Shanks couldn't look away, transfixed. Buggy's eyes were jittery, feral. Something had cracked, and Shanks was drowning under waves of raw emotion and power he'd never felt from the clown before. It was intoxicating. It was beautiful. It was terrifying.

Buggy was spreading his arms, and behind the redhead, there were startled yelps and breathless gasps. Shanks couldn't look away, not even as Benn called his name, desperation bleeding in. "I'll just have to show you Red Hair." It felt like Buggy was right beside him, speaking against his ear. Shanks swallowed, his entire body feeling hot. "Show me," he whispered. "Please."

"Make sure you get this through your thick skull, Shanks." The ship creaked, louder this time. Waves gathered unnaturally against the hull as if to lift it from the sea. "I am Buggy the Star Clown, of the Four Emperors of the Sea."

Anxiety and panic rippled over the Red Force's crew, and even Shanks felt like an invisible power was trying to pull him apart at unnatural seams. "Get out of my waters, Red Hair Shanks. And don't you *dare* come **back!**" The final word was screamed, and Buggy moved as if to throw his arms out to his sides, as if he were spreading wings. Shanks felt the swell of dangerous power, instinctually reaching for Gyphon once again, but didn't get a chance to draw the blade.

A tremendous golden beast broke the surface from beneath Buggy, jaws open wide and lined with long, white teeth. All at once, the pressure released Shanks and his crew, their ship dropped hard back into the sea, as the creature swallowed Buggy's body and presence. The view was surreal, the monster's shadow darkening the deck as it reached the peak of its lunge, then fell, fell, and crashed back into the sea. Saltwater was thrown as a high wake, spilling over the sides and raining down to drench the mesmerized crew.

Benn's grip had fallen away, and Shanks wanted to take a step, to go after the beast that had just taken Buggy away--but another power, familiar this time, held him in place.

"Don't go rushing off so soon, Red Hair." Yellow eyes bore into Shanks's back. "I assure you the clown is fine."

Dracule Mihawk was standing a few paces back from his old rival, and the Red Hair Pirates jumped away from the swordsman as they registered he was there. Shanks clenched his jaw, refusing to turn around. "Didn't you see what just happened? Isn't that your business partner?"

Mihawk arched a brow. "I believe I saw it better than you." He nodded towards Karai Bari Island, and the harbor. It was hard to make out, but Crocodile was kneeling at the end of the dock. A long, silver whistle was clutched firmly in a shaking hand, blood still dripping into the water from his self-inflicted wound. "That was no ordinary beast." Mihawk continued. "It was ours."

Darkness spread by the dock next to Crocodile, growing bigger and longer until it broke the surface. "Bananawani are surprisingly intelligent, loyal, and their main diet is sea kings once they

reach a proper size." Gold scales glistened, water sliding easily off the gigantic form as the Bananawani lined its head up against the dock. The very Bananawani that had just swallowed Buggy. "I never knew their true worth. But Buggy and Crocodile surprised me. Can you believe that?" Mihawk's lips were lifted in a genuine smile. "I thought I'd seen everything. But those two have surprised me again and again, every day."

The Bananawani had opened its mouth, and Crocodile disappeared inside without hesitation. An unconscious and saliva-covered clown was carried out a few moments later.

"Hawk Eyes," now it was Shanks whose voice quivered with emotion, "I know what's going on here. I know you and Crocodile are running the show. And you're using my—you're using Buggy." He finally turned to face the swordsman. Mihawk had not drawn his blade, his presence a heavy enough threat already. "Why do either of you care? You've got what you need, and your reputations are stable. You can build your utopia. But that's not what Buggy wants. He belongs on the sea. He belongs with—"Shanks stopped as Mihawk's eyes narrowed in warning. "You placed your bet for the future already. With Luffy's swordsman. So what else could you possibly want from Buggy?"

Mihawk sighed. "You are right. As a swordsman, I have decided that Roronoa is worth my investment. He shows true passion and drive I have long missed in a rival." A reminder that made Shanks wince. "I believe you heard it from Buggy, but I'll remind you. People change, Shanks." Mihawk reached up and gripped Yoru's hilt. "Unlike you, I have spread out my bets." The black blade was drawn slowly, "As a swordsman, I must continue training and ensure that all who challenge me only face me at my best. The thrill of a good fight, where victory is not assured, is what I seek. But I am also a pirate." The blade was leveled with Shanks, "and I wouldn't be a very good one if I didn't support my captain, would I?"

Shanks bit his lower lip and gripped his sword tightly before letting his hand drop. Mihawk's gaze did not leave him. "You're right." He looked back, towards Karai Bari, to the dock, at Crocodile kneeling with the unconscious Buggy still in his arms. Shanks had felt Buggy's presence and had seen *everything* hidden within. "Dammit. He really did get you both then. And all those pirates." The shore was still lined with Buggy's followers. "I looked away, and he got so strong. He changed."

On the docks, the Bananawani had stayed, watching her master as he wiped away saliva and called Buggy's name. The clown was breathing, and he no longer felt warm, but nothing Crocodile did was waking him up. He'd tried shaking him, threatening him, and he was about to resort to begging.

Mihawk stepped onto the dock with barely a sound, and Crocodile didn't startle when a hand landed on his shoulder. Yoru was settled on the dock, Mihawk's other hand going to Crocodile's chest as he kneeled with his partner. The larger man's heart was hammering, betraying the building panic. "He's okay," Mihawk whispered.

"He's not waking up."

Mihawk moved to examine Buggy more closely. "He's uninjured." The hand left Crocodile's chest and rested on Buggy's. Clear as before, he could feel a heartbeat, though a much calmer one than Crocodile's. "If I had to guess, I'd say he's exhausted."

"Why?" Crocodile adjusted his hold, lifting Buggy more securely in his arms. "What happened out there?"

"I'm not completely sure. From a distance, I thought our clown might be trying to use haki again, but I couldn't feel anything besides Shanks's when I got there." Hawkeye regarded the giant Bananawani, who was still watching them. They made eye contact, reptilian eyes steady as the beast rumbled low. "Thank you, Anna. I'll remind your daddy to bring you a special treat later."

Crocodile was torn between his panic and the absurdity of hearing Mihawk say 'daddy' in his calm and level tone. Disbelief won, and he sighed heavily, defeated. Anna had accepted the praise, sinking below the surface and soon vanishing despite her enormous size. "Your timing was impeccable, by the way. Did you have to fight?" Outside the harbor, the Red Force was already moving again, retreating, and Mihawk spared it a glance. "No. Red Hair agreed to leave amicably." Mihawk took hold of Crocodile's arms now, urging him to stand. It took some effort, but the largest of them was soon back on his feet. His legs were unstable, so Mihawk kept a hand on him to steady him.

"Did you find out what he wanted?" Not that it really mattered. The hatred for Red Hair Shanks only burned hotter in Crocodile's chest, and no explanation would soothe it. Mihawk had some idea what Shanks was doing, what he'd wanted, but he shook his head anyway. "I didn't ask. My only business was to make sure our chairman was safe."

As they approached the shore, Crocodile and Mihawk fell quiet. The pirates and mercenaries who had been ordered to wait were gathering now, all with similar questions on their lips. Instead of asking those questions, however, a shared gasp echoed through the crowd when they finally saw their unconscious leader.

"CAPTAIN BUGGY!!"

Crocodile winced, and Mihawk's glare quickly carved a path for them to keep walking unaccosted. "He's fine!" Crocodile shouted to the blubbering followers. "He just needs some rest. So quiet down!"

The volume was lowered around them, but Mihawk and Crocodile could still hear conspicuous whispers being passed around. Rumors would spiral out of control soon enough, but neither of them bothered to try and suppress them. As far as anyone would know, Buggy had repealed the Red Hair Pirates single-handedly, protecting his territory from an invading emperor. Crocodile and Mihawk only wanted to get Buggy away from prying eyes to decompress in peace.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

During a storm, a warship had been bearing down on them. Yet somehow, Buggy had saved his crew. No one knew how, but he'd done it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hot. Buggy felt hot, and blood and something were oozing from his body unbidden. His awareness expanded over his ship, crew, and then surrounding ships. He could feel the suffocating heat of the two brigs that were surely sunk and the Marines still scrambling to save them. In contrast, the warship was organized with men lining the bow, rifles aimed, and front cannons primed.

His breath came in quick gasps, hand over his chest as he stumbled down from the helm towards the mainmast. Buggy felt like he could see everything, feel everything, and it was all too much. It felt like he would die, but every fiber of his being burned with rage, power, and life.

A shockwave went off on Big Top's deck, rattling the rigging as Buggy's feet left the ground. A voice, his own but not, whispered behind his eyes.

High Wire.

The water around the ship seemed to freeze, the calm edge swirling and expanding until it engulfed all three Marine ships. They stilled unnaturally, the Marines shivering as the very air in their lungs seemed caught in a firm grip. They could only breathe when Buggy breathed. Long blue hair swirled and whipped around even as the storm's winds were silenced and the heavy rain evaporated.

Buggy's eyes were white, unseeing, as his mouth moved with words unsaid. That gentle voice was in his mind again, and he remembered where he'd heard it, when he'd last felt it. When he'd first eaten the accursed devil fruit and its power bloomed from his belly. When its name and abilities were engraved into his memory like he'd been born knowing them. Now the gentle whispers were back, advising him on how to harness the overwhelming sensations and take control of the new powers seeping out of his every pore.

A new roar enveloped the three Marine ships, men screaming in fear and confusion as they felt their feet leave solid ground. Their very ships soon followed, hulls dripping with seawater as they groaned under unnatural pressure that was gripping and twisting them from all sides.

Anger. It was anger that kept Buggy moving, his body slowly separating as he spread his limbs. He was in control, and his ship was center stage. The Marine ships were slowly contorted, seams forming where they weren't before. Those lines spread as if through the air itself to masts, sails, and the organic bodies of the crews. The clouds started to dip and section before the movements were mirrored in the water below.

The slow and gentle separations offered time for the Marines to experience confusion, shock, panic, disbelief, and then terror. They couldn't connect how they lived as their ship, comrades, and

bodies broke to pieces. One eye could see to another, headless stumps hovering in front of their own faces, sectioned torsos colliding with thighs, and every sensation registered as if they were still whole. Unlike the clown controlling them all, they didn't have the spatial awareness necessary to keep track of their parts, so all they could do was succumb to queasiness and dread.

"Consider this your punishment." Every ear could hear the breathy voice carried through the eerie stillness. They were contained in an otherworldly, timeless space as the storm raged unheard in a perfect circle around them. "You...you all decided to chase the great Captain Buggy. You thought you could capture my ship. You **threatened** my crew. And you had the audacity to **shoot me** in the back like **cowards!**" Buggy's fingers slowly curled, joints cracking one by one. Pieces of ship and crew began to dart about, mixing up into jumbled chaos.

"But don't fret. You incited my temper, and I am gracing you with my greatest power. Though it's far more than you deserve." Blood was dripping off Buggy's chin, shirt already stained by the gore from the wound in his chest. Yet his grin was wild, euphoric, teeth stained red, and tears gathering at the corners of his eyes.

"Now, why don't you all flashily die!" Buggy dropped, parts zooming with the main body and slamming back together when his feet hit the deck.

"CHOP CHOP GRANDSTAND FESTIVAL!"

Arms crossed over his chest, fingers clenching into fists, and Buggy's deafening shout caused a chain reaction. Every part of the enemies and their ships sped to one of three fixed points in the orbiting space around Buggy's stage and crashed together. There was no returning to their original form, with munitions, fire, metal, wood, and flesh colliding into haphazard amalgamations. There was barely a breath of unbridled chaos as the parts converged, shined, ignited, and then detonated.

A new smoke flooded the contained space, then burst into the storm as the clouds above split, and the sky seemed to vibrate with a ghostly shriek. Intense flames engulfed the broken remains of the unrecognizable Marine ships, all parts of sailors not yet dead crying out as they were drowned with the return of the storm's waves.

The thick, black smoke rose and filled the ripped-open space in the clouds, a signal as much as a warning to ships for miles around. From the carnage, only one ship emerged unscathed. Big Top, its sails full and helm still locked after Buggy had steered it through the maelstrom. The deck was littered with bodies, but each one was asleep, peaceful, and untouched by Buggy's devastating display.

Big Top's captain stood on the deck, arms still crossed over his chest and his entire body shaking with effort and exhaustion. Adrenalin and blind rage had carried him, but now a cooling rain was washing them away as his ship sailed itself to safety. Buggy sucked in a pained breath, then blood poured from his lips as he retched, doubling over, forced to catch himself against the mainmast. His body had not been ready or **healthy** enough for all that power. Every ounce of him was burning and cramping, his thoughts swimming before they were lost to the mess of fever and the agony wrecking his body.

This time, this time he had to be dying. His legs gave out, and he slid down till he sat on the deck, blood smeared on the mast and pooling beneath him. The whispers teaching him his new power were gone, lost, and forgotten as the quieting storm and fading wind carried his crew to peaceful waters. His body was slowly engulfed in a deep, deafening darkness, his breathing slowing and his eyes finally closing.

Madam Zara had arrived at Crocodile's tent before she was summoned. The two ex-warlords had not questioned her presence, too used to her inexplicable whims and fortunate timing. Crocodile had laid Buggy onto his bed and let himself be waved back so the doctor could examine him. Mihawk stayed close to the older man even as he started to pace, an occasional touch or look offered every time Crocodile turned to him for *something*.

"If you don't calm down, Sir Crocodile, I might have to sedate you." Madam Zara called over her shoulder. "The chairman is perfectly healthy. He has no physical injuries, no signs of internal trauma, and his temperature is normal. It's like he was never sick at all." The woman turned to the two, a slight smirk lifting her lips. "Based on what you described, Lord Mihawk, I'd say this entire ordeal proves *my* theory correct."

Mihawk's expression was schooled, so Crocodile had to be the one to ask. "What theory? You knew what was wrong with him?"

Madam Zara waved the half-accusation off. "I didn't know. That's why I said theory. I assume that means neither of you ever listened when I talked about it before." She paused, letting an awkward silence build until the two men looked away. She shook her head. "His *devil fruit*, gentleman. I'd suspected it was part of the cause of his condition, and the longer symptoms persisted, the more I thought it might be changing." The doctor motioned to the bed, to all of Buggy. "What you saw out there? That was his devil fruit's awakened powers."

The swordsman finally spoke up. "So you're saying his devil fruit awakened while he was with Shanks?" Yellow eyes narrowed. "What could have caused it?"

The apparent hostility was again met with a dismissive wave of Madam Zara's hand. "I promise you two don't need to fish for reasons to be angry. You're pirates. If I'm going to explain, I want you to listen." She motioned for the pair to approach the bed, moving the nearby chairs so both could sit near the unconscious clown. They didn't hesitate; Madam Zara had seen far worse of them regarding their closeness with Buggy.

"There we are. Now," Madam Zara retrieved a small notepad from inside her white coat. "Believe it or not, I've been researching devil fruits and kept detailed accounts of every anomaly you described while Captain Buggy was unconscious. Adding to today's event and his improved condition, I believe this isn't the first time he's accessed those abilities." She caught Mihawk's eyes, "I think the same can be said of his haki. Individuals are born with the conqueror's haki, and he grew up surrounded by powerful men who were talented in the other two types. You mentioned to me, Lord Mihawk, that his body might already know how to use haki, but his mind doesn't remember."

Crocodile's brow furrowed as he looked at his partner. Mihawk nodded in response to the silent question, confirming he had discussed haki at length with the woman. Madam Zara watched their exchange, making sure Crocodile was placated before she continued. "While suppressing the traumas he's experienced and ignoring the scars he bears, Captain Buggy inadvertently forgot the powers that likely carried him through those events. But those powers have only grown, and I've noticed the pattern of triggers when they present themselves."

"The hallucinations," Crocodile growled.

"The memories he's tried to forget. I've also noted that the most powerful reactions happen when his temper has been provoked beyond a reasonable threshold." The woman had been paying closer attention than Mihawk or Crocodile had realized, but each was grateful. Madam Zara was a neutral

party, with an analytical mind clear of emotional attachment that allowed her to build her hypotheses. "Another thing. When I first treated him when he'd been shot, his body showed similar symptoms from the past three days. The steam, in particular, was hard to ignore. I'd never had another reason to suspect another cause besides his fever and injury, but hindsight is 20/20. It would explain what I've seen and what happened today."

As usual, Madam Zara was right. Neither man had to tell her they agreed, nor were they annoyed that she may have figured out what was happening to Buggy, no matter how long it had taken. The pair had seen potential in the clown, but they hadn't realized how *much* was there until cracks formed in the lifetime of shields Buggy had surrounded himself with. Now, they may end up stranded at a crossroads. Pushing Buggy to harness his latent abilities would mean exposing the wounds he'd spent over thirty years ignoring. But to allow him to pretend none of this had happened meant leaving the clown as a time bomb, a danger to himself and everyone around him. Buggy could not remain weak, not in the New World or while he was an Emperor.

After some final assurances that Buggy was fine, Madam Zara left the three leaders alone in Crocodile's tent. Once they were gone, Crocodile hunched over in his chair, holding his face in his hand as he groaned. There was a light pat on his shoulder, Mihawk's timid effort at comforting his partner. "I did tell you this wasn't your fault."

"Shanks took him right out from under me. How is that not my fault?"

The swordsman hummed, then changed tactics. "He did do that. But Buggy is fine. Perhaps it's better than fine if the doctor is correct. So, things worked out in our favor. There's no reason to spoil a victory with pointless regrets."

Crocodile sighed, pushing himself to his feet and shooting Mihawk an annoyed look. He hated when the other man would use simple logic to defeat his dour moods. It worked too well and left Crocodile no reason to act somber and grouchy even though he wanted to.

All that was left to do now was wait for Buggy to wake up. Crocodile shrugged off his coat, laying it over his abandoned chair before sitting on the bed beside the clown, sliding to rest against the plush pillows. As he gathered Buggy back into his arms, Mihawk quickly left his chair to occupy Buggy's other side. He even grabbed Crocodile's arm to silently ask that he *share* the clown. "Tell me, did you keep your other promise?"

"My other--" Crocodile started questioning what the swordsman meant, only to clench his jaw when he remembered. The kiss. "I never promised that!"

Mihawk smirked, sliding to lay beside Buggy and resting his hand against the clown's chest. "So you haven't kissed him yet."

Crocodile had to close his eyes, wishing he'd thought to get a cigar before he'd gotten into bed. Now he was stuck, Buggy half laid on him and Mihawk making it clear he wasn't about to let his partner leave. "He's probably going to freak out when he wakes up like this," Crocodile mumbled. Mihawk hummed an affirmative, breathing deeply before he closed his eyes. He was curled up at Buggy's side, looking like he was already asleep. Crocodile scowled, but he didn't bother trying to keep the swordsman awake. It wasn't like there was anything left to talk about until their clown woke up.

When the brat started to squirm, Crocodile tightened his hold to keep him still. He'd noticed Buggy was an active sleeper, and the ex-warlord wasn't in the mood to get kicked or slapped by flailing limbs. The grip was met with a grunt, which pulled Crocodile's attention down--to bleary, sea-blue eyes squinting up at him. "Oh, you're awake," Crocodile observed. "What's wrong, too warm?"

One of Mihawk's eyes peaked open, but he didn't move even as Buggy groaned softly and tried to sit up. The clown was held in place quickly, making it clear Crocodile wasn't about to let him get up. "Stay down, brat. If you get up, you might get yourself into more trouble. I've had enough of it for one day."

"The hell does that mean?" Buggy groused. Crocodile watched the chairman, waiting until he finally registered where he was. With Buggy's temper and mouth acting first, it always took a moment before the clown was fully aware of any situation. Crocodile could see the gradual change in the other's expression, pupils drifting one way, then the next, until Buggy's eyes widened comically. Crocodile met the bewildered stare with a sly grin, "Coming back to you yet, clown?"

Judging by the flush spreading over Buggy's face, he was at least realizing where he was. It was a miracle he didn't split apart to escape from between the two ex-warlords. Crocodile could practically hear the panicked shrieking and jumbled thoughts in Buggy's head. He let the younger man stew briefly, then nudged him to bring him back to reality. "Don't think about it too hard right now. Just tell me what you remember."

"Nrg! Ah-okay..." Buggy was grasping, searching his memories. It took time, but the events started coming back gradually. "I remember being on Red Force. Stupid Shanks took me there, and he wanted me to abandon Karai Bari and leave with him." The clown tried to sit up for the second time, and Crocodile let him. "He pissed me off. I'm pretty sure I hit him, and we must've been yelling because one of his men came to interrupt. I saw a chance to get out, so I ran."

Beside them, Mihawk had closed his eyes again, but Crocodile could tell the swordsman was still listening. He set his hand around Buggy's waist, distracting the clown momentarily. "C-Crocodile?"

"I said don't think about it right now. Anything else you remember?"

Buggy audibly swallowed but did as he was told. "They tried to attack me...I think. It's pretty hazy. I remember seeing the island, and I thought Anna would be nearby if I could just get off Red Hair's ship." Buggy frowned, looking at his own hands and flexing his fingers. "Wait, how did I get here? Did you guys...you brought me back?"

"Not quite," Crocodile said. "Anna did bring you back, but you're the one who held off Red Hair. It was quite the show from the shore." That hand left Buggy's waist and rested on his head, lightly ruffling the soft blue locks. "Your devil fruit is awakened. You nearly tore apart Shanks's entire ship and everyone on it."

The clown's mouth went slack, and he didn't react as Mihawk finally sat up and pressed a hand to Buggy's back. "You didn't finish whatever your attack was, but Shanks retreated without much fuss after you resisted so openly." The swordsman crooked a finger under Buggy's chin, turning his head so they were face to face. "Congratulations are in order, Emperor. You scared off Red Hair Shanks and stopped a war before it could start."

"Wh-wh-what?? You mean he--Shanks just left?!" Buggy's voice was a mixture of disbelief and something buried *deep*. Crocodile wasn't sure what Mihawk saw on Buggy's face, but it made his expression tighten, and his eyes widened a fraction. Fury was being suppressed, and Crocodile pulled Buggy back into his lap to help the other hide it. The clown tilted back until he was lying across the larger man's legs, and Crocodile had to suck in a breath. Buggy looked angry, but his eyes were watery, and the betrayal reflected in them made Crocodile's heart ache. "Buggy?"

The clown jolted, likely not used to hearing his name from Crocodile. A tear escaped from the corners of his eyes, and his hands flew up to catch them, trying to wipe the rest away furiously.

"Fuck! It's not what it looks like. I...I didn't want to go. I told him he had no right to take me, not after he...he..." The tears were still coming, and Crocodile felt the other's body tremble with effort to hold them back.

Crocodile didn't need to see the look Mihawk was giving him to know what was happening. "Forget about that bastard, brat." Hands were jerked away from Buggy's face, and Crocodile lifted him up as he leaned down. "You're here now. We've got you." The final words were spoken against Buggy's forehead, Crocodile pressing his lips to it in a gentle kiss. It took a moment for the crying to stop, and when the largest man pulled back, Buggy was staring at him with a brand-new expression. It made Crocodile self-conscious, and he bared his teeth. "What?"

Buggy bit his lip, nervous, but he pressed ahead anyway. "I-is that, um...is that the thing I'm supposed to keep ignoring?" Sea-blue eyes darted to Mihawk. The swordsman's pupils were blown like a cat focused on a favorite toy. "Because it's getting hard. I'm s-starting to think that you guys *actually* like me." The clown pouted, looking up at the ceiling as he hugged himself. "The attention is nice. But that's a problem if you're just acting like this because I was sick, and now...well, this. I can't handle any more disappointment right now."

Oh...Crocodile could feel Mihawk's gaze burning into him. Crocodile resisted the urge to tell the swordsman off and call Buggy a fool. The two men were both idiots, hopeless and naive in their own *unique* ways that caused Crocodile all kinds of frustration.

"Why are you this *stupid*?" He wasn't asking to get an answer. Instead, Crocodile stopped Buggy from speaking as he leaned down again to capture the clown's lip in a deep kiss. Crocodile was not shy, letting go of the pent-up passion he'd been fighting to hide for most of their time on Karai Bari. He claimed Buggy's mouth, mapping it out with his tongue, well aware of the way Mihawk was pressing close, watching. Much to Crocodile's pleasure, Buggy wasn't just a doll under him once he'd seemed to grasp what was happening. The brat sucked on his tongue, hands coming up to grip dark hair to coax him to angle his head, and *damn* it felt good.

They'd have to deal with the rest of their conversation later. Address Buggy's apparent trauma and discuss what to do about his returning abilities. For now, they lost themselves to passion, sharing kiss after kiss until Crocodile and Buggy were breathless. And then Buggy fisted the front of Crocodile's vest, dragging him down for more. Mihawk encouraged them softly, licking his lips before he pressed his mouth against Crocodile's neck.

Later. They'd talk later.

Wounded and retreating, the Red Force's deck was quiet and gloomy. Blood was still being cleaned from where it had stained the deck, and men were scrambling below to ensure their patches held. The giant bananawani had caused significant damage to their hull with only two strikes, but she hadn't been trying to sink them. One look at the damage showed that the beast had only been warning them. The creature was well-trained, and that fact was unnerving.

Shanks was perhaps the most miserable sight, locked away in his cabin with his first mate hovering. He held an entire jug of sake that Benn had tried and failed twice to take away before it could be drained. It was nearly empty now, so there was no point in enforcing moderation. Instead, Benn retrieved a second jug, pulling a chair around Shanks's desk to sit across from his captain. "So, Boss. For all your bluster and determination to come here, we're leaving empty-handed." There was no need to state the obvious, but Benn had been against this entire trip. He wanted his 'I told you so' moment. "Despite what it looked like, you could've taken control back. Hell, we could have done this quietly when it was dark and avoided any confrontation."

The redhead smiled, a defeated expression as he accepted his first mate's criticisms. "I know Benn. I should have listened to you." The sake jug was lifted and drained. It was tossed aside once empty, and Shanks dropped his gaze to the floor. "Thanks for going along with it to the end. I can't believe I didn't see any of this, though. It was like my sight was blocked."

Benn took a drink from his sake jug before he offered it to Shanks. "That's not surprising." He smirked. "You always go blind when you look at Buggy. Blind and dumb."

Shanks winced and took the offered jug. "Yeah, I can't really deny that anymore." The redhead admits before taking a long drink. "Did you see him, Benn? He was... magnificent."

"More like terrifying." Benn huffed. "He definitely didn't need to be rescued. *We* almost needed saving. And that was before Hawk Eyes showed up." The first mate took the jug back from Shanks's loose grip. "After all the effort I put in to lure him away, too. He probably sensed your haki."

Shanks only nodded, sure that his old rival had picked up his presence once he'd stopped hiding it. They'd thought the lure of Blackbeard would be enough to keep the swordsman away, but they hadn't considered Mihawk would prioritize Buggy over a promising fight. "I thought he was the same old Buggy underneath it all. When they made him an emperor, and I saw that Cross Guild flier, I was sure he was in trouble." Benn didn't interrupt as his captain laughed bitterly. "Damn, I really couldn't have been more wrong. He told me straight to my face, and I still didn't want to see it."

"It's like I said, Boss. You go blind."

The redhead laughed again, and it sounded more genuine. "If I'd noticed back at Marineford, we could've avoided all this! Considering he'd escaped from Impel Down..." Shanks trailed off, only to yelp when Benn kicked his shin. "Ow!"

"Don't start on that again! You sulked about not knowing he was locked up for a *month* after Marineford."

"Dammit Beckman!" Shanks growled. "It wasn't fair! If I'd known he was there, I would've stormed that prison and taken him out of there." His expression hardened, and his haki flared. "And killed every last guard who'd laid a hand on him."

Benn scoffed. "Well, it's a good thing you didn't know." Impel Down was known not just for its security but for the torture it administered to all its prisoners. If Shanks had heard of Buggy's capture, the first mate was sure they would have had to follow him and wage an all-out war with the prison and the Marines. And all because of one unruly clown. "Look, there's something more important we need to talk about." Benn kept the sake away when Shanks reached for it. "After what happened and what you saw, will you try again?"

It was a heavy question. Shanks very obviously wanted the alcohol to be used as a distraction. The more drunk he got, the easier it would be to deflect answering. But Benn needed a serious answer, so he didn't back down. The redhead was forced to sit back in his chair, relenting to his first mate. "To be honest, yes. But not anytime soon, I promise. I can't give up just because of one setback, though."

"Well, after today, it'll be a lot harder. Buggy seemed pretty pissed off." Benn pointed out. "If Hawk Eyes hadn't been so level-headed, this could have led to a war."

Benn was right. Shanks didn't want to think about standing on the opposite side of a battlefield

from Buggy. Standing up, Shanks was surprisingly steady as he walked to the far side of his cabin. The old log book Buggy had dropped was on the ground, and he kneeled down to pick it up. "I won't be so wreckless next time. I'll figure something out." He opened the front cover to the vivre card still safely tucked inside. "I'll have to come up with an apology. Something so bold and flashy that he won't be able to resist."

"I thought he was the one that liked to stand out, Boss. Wouldn't that just piss him off even more?"

"He is a showman, but if it's something big and impressive for him and him alone? That means he's still in the spotlight and wouldn't be able to resist." Shanks was walking back to his desk, still looking at the vivre card. The scrap of paper was whole again, the burnt edges restored. "I still can't believe he charmed Hawk Eyes and *Crocodile* of all people. Damn them." Benn left his chair and joined Shanks behind his desk, acting more as a stabilizing presence than to uphold the conversation. He took a swig from the sake jug and offered it to Shanks. He'd heard what he needed.

"Unambitious, he said." Shanks rejected the offered drink, pressing his hand against his chest instead as he grinned. "Well, it should almost be time—only a few more years. I'll show you soon, Buggs. My ambition."

His dream. A pirate's dream.

Chapter End Notes

Awakened Powers of the Bara Bara no Mi/Chop Chop Fruit revealed:

High Wire - When active, Buggy can levitate his entire body, even his feet. The range at which he can control his parts triples. So long as he is within a set distance of a solid surface, he can even levitate over open water.

Grandstand Festival - A 'stage' circle of space is set around Buggy, where everything is unaffected by his power. All around that 'stage' are the 'grandstands,' a second, larger circle of defined space. The size of the 'grandstands' depends on how much energy Buggy can pour into the ability. Within the 'grandstands,' Buggy controls everything. Like a standard Chop Chop Festival, he separates everything chaotically. The follow-up of the separation is to slam everything back together without any rhyme or reason, triggering one or multiple devastating explosions at set points. The ability is meant to act as a catastrophic finale because of the nearly uncontrollable destruction it causes.

End Notes

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